

THE HORNBEAM TREE

Unselfishly and without question Eva Iveson has devoted her life to her family. As companion to her parents in their declining years and then as house-keeper to her elder brother, she has remained always steadfast and reliable—like the hornbeam tree in her garden, tough, well-rooted, and strong against all vagaries of changing weather. The sudden death of her brother Henry leaves her alone in middle-age, and when she discovers that even this elderly brother found comfort and romance with one of her bridge-playing friends she realises all she has missed. When she falls in love with a man young enough to be her son, the affair might easily have resulted in degradation for both of them. But Eva's integrity of character proves not only her own salvation but a noble influence in moulding the character of her lover; facing her supreme test she is still like the hornbeam tree, which, shorn of its summer foliage, has beauty even in its stark bareness under the winter moonlight.

By the same author:

QUALITY

TAMMY OUT OF TIME

BUT THE MORNING WILL COME

SUDDEN GLORY

CID RICKETTS SUMNER

The Hornbeam Tree

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I

THERE is a village south of Boston, not far enough down to be called the Cape, near enough for rather inconvenient commuting, a typical New England village with green-shuttered white houses, and now and then a grey-shingled or a barn-red one, with tall elms, lilac hedges and the sea. In June summer people swarm in and stay till September, when they take off again, leaving the native-born and certain newcomers who have become year-rounders—lone women, retired couples and a few young married folk with children. A nice place, anyone would say, a place where past and present seem to mingle harmoniously, each tolerant of the other. For the past lives on in the square sea captains' houses built in the seventeen or early eighteen hundreds and in the yet earlier Cape Cod cottages with their steep stairs and gunstock beams and wooden pins driven long ago and good for another hundred years.

These old houses, the unchanging contour of the land, the bay that is gathered in from the sea by a long straight arm of sand with a fist to hold Gurnet light aloft; the streets that speak of another era in names like Powder Point, Meeting-house, Shipyard Lane, Old Cove; seagulls in the wind, little wet stones at the water's edge, the ocean itself—all these things give a quality of timelessness to the place. That perhaps is what holds people there or brings them back summer after summer, giving them a semblance of peace, an illusion of continuity in a topsy-turvy world.

New England has more than its share of lone women, leftovers, left-outers, no longer young. Look over Symphony Hall some Friday afternoon and you will see them. What a lot of grey heads! Neatly dressed, not quite in style but independent of style, these women attend lectures, they study painting,

they have bridge clubs, work one afternoon at the Red Cross, and they belong to an old china or glass society or one that studies buttons, pot lids, coins. They are always busy. Their lives are full, if not rich.

Many of these women live in large houses that once were filled and now are empty, giving back a hollow echoing sound when a door slams on a windy day. Most of them are just comfortable, as the saying goes, a few have to pinch and scrape, but they all keep on with the old way of life as much as they can, cut down and trimmed though it be by lack of servants since the war. They hang onto their way of living out of pride or sentiment or inertia, or out of inability to give up possessions which have become too much a part of them. Or maybe keeping everything the same gives them the illusion that they too are unchanged. There is usually a younger generation scattered now to west or south—nieces, nephews, grown children who could use the old highboys, the china and glass and silver, the tiptop tables, the poster beds and be thankful to get them, such things being fashionable as well as useful—and prices what they are today. But the widowed mothers, the maiden aunts say, or seem to say, "You just wait, it will be your turn next."

This village on the south shore had its quota of lone women. At one time there were four living side by side on one street. It was not really a street, just a short lane, one of many that ran at right angles from the main residential avenue to the bay. Looking down it, one would have thought that it led to nothing but the water, for there were only woods on each side till it turned and ran parallel to the shore where there was space for just four houses before the marsh began. It was a lane that was named for a bush that was named for a fish—Shadbush Lane, it was called. All winter the graceless branches stood in stiff grey clumps taking the wind, the snow and the cold. Then at the time of the running of the shad, they put forth their tiny eggshell blossoms, the first wild bloom of spring, braving the April air when marshes still wore their tawny winter look, when swamp maples showed no more than a translucent brick-red haze, and the only real green was where rosettes of skunk cabbage studded the low ground.

Shadbush Lane was marked by a sign at the corner, two signs in fact, the lower one listing the people who lived there—Hildon, Wake, Iveson, Starling. The villagers called it Widow's Walk. Only Miss Eva Iveson was not a widow, she had never married. She was the one who stayed and took care of Mama and Papa and finally Brother Henry when he came home to die. Now he was gone too, and she was alone, like the other three.

Her house was third in the row and not really any bigger than Mrs. Hilton's white colonial. It just looked bigger because, as Miss Eva would say not apologetically but with apparent pride, "Papa and Mama had it done over in the '90's when they sold the Milton house and made this their year-round home." It was the doing-over of course that accounted for the turrets and balconies and gingerbread trim, the portico at one side and the octagonal summer room at the other with a second-floor sunroom above it. When people said, "Why don't you tear off all those excrescences and show the good lines beneath?" Miss Eva just smiled and shook her head as if what Mama and Papa Iveson had done was sacred as far as she was concerned, right down to the last antimacassar. Keeping everything the same seemed to be her little memorial to them and she would not change a picture or a cushion, not for the world. Maybe that fulfilled her obligation to the past and left her ready at last to be free. Even the bathrooms remained the same—pull cords and four-legged tubs.

The strange thing was that after forty-odd years of this dull and dutiful life, Miss Eva was so little changed. Her sister Lucia had been the beauty. Miss Eva had been a nondescript child with the sort of protective colouring which the less attractive of two sisters is apt to wear. She still wore it. That was why everyone kept right on calling her Miss Eva so many years after Lucia—Miss Iveson, of course—had married and gone west and died of influenza. No one would purposely give a second glance to Miss Eva in a crowd. But if one did by chance overcome the invisibility any woman of her age seems to acquire, he might have seen that incongruously youthful, that almost virginal quality which had been em-

balanced by the very monotony of her days. It was visible in her carriage, her step and in her eyes, well-set, dark-blue eyes that looked as if they were still searching with hope and excitement, as if they still expected to come on something wonderful. In fact if Miss Eva had not had that dignity and reserve which covered her like a cloak, one might have said that she had the very devil himself in her eyes.

She came by it honestly. There were two portraits in the library over the mantel. One was Mama, a delicate-featured, slender woman with a closed, secret look. The other was Papa. He was a horse of a different colour—heavy, vigorous, florid, patently a man who got a lot out of life. Maybe that was why he took so long to give it up, the nurse—he dismissed three till he got a pretty one—pushing the wheel chair around, Miss Eva trailing after. “Papa adored Mama,” Miss Eva would say, showing off the portraits to callers. “It was his greatest cross that business kept him away from home so much.” Other businessmen came home nights. Why didn’t he? One look at the portrait and anyone could guess.

Then there was Brother Henry, if one needed more evidence. After his wife left him, the two daughters being grown and settled, he took time off from law practice to have a physical checkup. Right after that he came home to die. He took five years to do it and helped himself along. Anybody living on Widow’s-Walk couldn’t help but hear the empty bottles crash when the garbage man came round on Wednesdays and dumped the trash cans into his open truck. Of course, Henry’s main trouble wasn’t drinking, it was something deep-seated and hopeless from the first. But it was a stroke that got him in the end, right in the midst of shaving, one blowy wintry morning with his braces hanging down over his trousers and no shirt on. He wasn’t really old, just done for, gone in a flash, in a twinkling. “No dignity to it,” commented Mrs. Starling who lived next door in the grey-shingled cottage.

She dropped in one morning not long after the funeral. “Very sad, very sad indeed,” she said. “As for me, I am determined to die in bed.” They were in the butler’s pantry, a dark little passageway of a room, gloomy even with the overhead

light on. Miss Eva was getting down her best Spode tea set and Mrs. Starling was perched on the high stool, all grey and brown and thin as a sharp-shinned hawk.

Miss Eva shook soap flakes sparingly into the sink. "I don't know that we are always given our choice in the matter of dying." Or in the matter of living either, she thought. Her own life—now that she had time and solitude in which to examine it—hadn't it clamped itself down on her as intimately and relentlessly as the shell on a turtle? Not all at once, but the result was the same. Habit and the years—she was just beginning to see how they had crept up on her.

Mrs. Starling waited till Miss Eva had finished running hot water. "You don't mean that you are getting ready to have the bridge club this afternoon?"

"I see no reason for not taking my turn as usual." She swished the dish mop till suds came. Habit—habit had spoken then, the old conventional automatic response. But was she going right on as she had for the last twenty or more years? Was she forever trapped by these small activities she had taken up just to fill in the time because there was nothing else she could do, because it was expected of her, Mrs. Hildon saying, "Why, Miss Eva, with those cupboards full of glass you really ought to join a study club and learn what you have," Mrs. Wake next door saying in her soft persistent drawl, "Now, honey, you ought to get out more and with your reading and all you ought to join that poetry group they're getting up"? The poetry group had been the best of all her activities. She made up poems when she took her daily walk alongshore, coming home refreshed and ready to read to Mama or rub her back or later, when Mama was gone, to do whatever must be done for Papa.

"Well," said Mrs. Starling now, grudgingly because she disliked agreeing with anyone and seldom did, "you are probably right. I'll phone the others for you. After blows and bereavements one has to go on somehow, as I well know."

Miss Eva set the teapot down into the water with a splash. "Go on? I haven't begun yet." At once she could feel Mrs. Starling's eyes boring into her back.

"Well, really! Sometimes when you come out quick with something—and the look of you in that black jersey and red scarf—you make me wonder."

"Wonder what?"

"You are the most unsettled woman of settled years that I have ever met up with. It's not so much what you do and say as the way you look in spite of yourself. I'm not one to be taken in."

"Is that so?" Miss Eva turned slowly and stared at her, every guard up. Old witch, she thought.

"Oh, I remember you that first summer I came back here to the old house to live, Dr. Starling just buried. A plain young girl in pigtails and a middy, out on the bay in that old catboat all vacation long. It's not every woman that improves with age."

"No?" Miss Eva's mind went back, searching for that little girl, lost now and gone forever. But was she wholly lost, with her wild free spirit, her expectation, her sense of life stretching ahead, rich, full, unknown? Had she been buried too deep by layers of time? Was she like the tree that adds a yearly circle in its growth and makes at last a rigid prisoner of that first early sapling which swayed with every breeze and tossed its branches in the sun?

"Now you're here alone in this big house, you've got to settle." Mrs. Starling's eyes took on a wicked gleam. "You'll see what it's like now."

Miss Eva turned away and began lifting the cups out of the water, setting them in the rack on the drainboard. Glad of company, she thought; wants everyone to be as soured and lonely as she is in spite of all her boasting about how nice it is to be independent and do as you please in your own house. But all Miss Eva said was "The house does seem queer, so empty. At night it makes sounds I've never noticed before, as if it were breathing. The branches of the hornbeam tree outside my bedroom window creak like old bones and the clocks tick louder than they used to. Everything is becoming more itself than it was."

Mrs. Starling let out the little bleat that served her as a laugh. "That's the way with people too, people who live alone.

They get to be more themselves than ever—that's why they're so peculiar, I guess."

"I don't believe that for one minute. You don't get peculiar unless you already had it in you to be so. As for me," Miss Eva added more quietly, "for so many years I have been dispersed, parcelled out to—to others."

"You've had your share of taking care of the old and the sickly. Never lost patience with that mother of yours, no matter how——"

"How could I lose patience with Mama, so appreciative as she was! Why, she would never let anyone else come near her, said I was worth a dozen nurses."

"Humph, no ten dozen would have stood what you took."

"Mama was the most courageous of sufferers," Miss Eva said with firmness. Mama had never cared much for Mrs. Starling—a good plain New Englander all right, but no finesse, she said—and Mrs. Starling knew it.

"Yes, yes," Mrs. Starling said, "so she often told me, and you did your duty far as I can see, living next door and not one to miss anything. Not that I've been a prying, spying neighbour, I'm sure."

Miss Eva sighed. "You've been one to call on in time of need." Like the morning when Henry was stricken. Downstairs in the kitchen getting his breakfast ready, she had heard the sound of a fall. She had stood waiting, coffee-pot in hand, waiting for the low murmur of his voice damning it all to hell, whatever he had dropped or knocked over. For these last years, profanity seemed to ease some rebellion deep within him. But there was no sound, not a step or a door slamming. That was the very moment when the house had begun to feel strange and empty, had begun to breathe audibly. She had gone upstairs, slowly at first, listening, wondering, hesitant because he was particular about his looks, did not like her to come upon him till he was all bathed and shaven and back in his room ready for his tray. The silence had led her on, faster and faster, till she had found him all in a huddle on the tiled floor. With a wrench now she turned her mind from that scene.

"Pushing eighty as I am," Mrs. Starling was saying, "and

sloping rapidly downward to the grave, I have no need of compliments."

"I should think one would need them all the more then—though I spoke only the truth. You have been a good neighbour."

"Humph. Fortitude is the last virtue."

Miss Eva's hand tightened on the cup she held and she felt a sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach. Fortitude? Was that all it boiled down to in the end? How bleak, how intolerable! She was not yet ready to be so reduced. No, no, and she would not let herself be driven to it. She had to have time, time in which to live. The cup in her hand cracked with a small grating sound and quick as a flash she hurled it into the trash basket in the corner. She could still throw something where she wanted it to go—a hang-over maybe from basketball at college.

"That lovely cup! Why, it might have been mended. There is a man——"

"It's been used enough." A pitcher too often to the well. She—she had never been used—though in one way perhaps she had. What was it Brother Henry had said, not long after he came home? "Now little Eva"—giving her the old childhood name—"you've been used enough. When I get down and can't look after myself, you must have a nurse for me, two if need be. I won't have you doing anything for me. Not for me." And when she had protested, saying how gladly she had cared for Mama, he had burst out in what seemed to her then a quite unreasonable manner, "Oh, Eva, didn't you ever see what she was doing to you, year after year? Just living off you——"

"The idea, Henry! Looking after Mama was my reason for—for living and——"

He had turned away then. "God damn it, she was clever, our Mama!" Then at the door he looked back, flinging the words at her, "Why do you suppose I cleared out so early? Why did Lucia run away? Haven't you ever thought about anything in your life?" And he had stomped away swearing under his breath. Of course he and Mama had never been very congenial. He hadn't really appreciated her.

Mrs. Starling hooked one heel of her sensible brown Oxfords over the rung of the stool and regarded Miss Eva's rigid back with speculative eyes. "I should think you would travel. While you're able. You have the means. Put it off till you break a hip and it'll be too late."

Miss Eva ran a pewter pitcher full of hot water and poured it over the dishes in the drainer. Broken hip! While you're able! The old death's-head, the old dispenser of gloom, the old buzzard on a limb. She drew a long breath and said evenly, "I've thought of that. Of course Mama took me practically everywhere, except South America." But wasn't that just the trouble? Mama took me. Everything taken care of, everything arranged in advance, always the two of us. "What a sweet companionship between mother and daughter, how delightful that you are so congenial!" people had said. Had they been so, really? Even now did she have any idea what Mama had been like, as a human being? She herself had been a dutiful daughter, that was all. When she might have had—what? Adventure? Romance? Wasn't that what she had been hungry for, all those years? In Florence, for instance, looking across the pension at a group of college girls travelling together. "Common," Mama had said, annoyed by their laughter. Again, at the opera house in Brussels, looking over the rows of unknown faces to see a man and a girl together—she could still see them vividly after all these years, he bending toward the girl, she looking up at him, and Mama, noting her interest—Mama always saw everything—saying, "Brazen cocotte! Such women will be in the drawing-room next."

Miss Eva set the pitcher on the shelf. "We went abroad once for six weeks and stayed two years. Winters on the Riviera, summers in Norway or Switzerland. There were other trips, too." How many years she had talked like this, Miss Eva thought, taking a linen dish towel from a drawer to the left of the sink, how many years she had said the right, the trite, the banal words! "Mama had a passion for travel." But why? What had driven her, what deep restlessness, what desperation? "I don't know that I would dare leave the house," she went on, for that was what women always said when they lived alone. "The pipes——"

. "For heaven's sake, don't stay at home on account of pipes! I know too many women wrapped up in pipes as tight as a hot-water heater."

Miss Eva looked round and smiled, her eyes dancing, her face lighted up. "Mrs. Starling, I refuse to be likened to a hot-water heater."

"Very useful things, hot-water heaters."

Useful? Miss Eva was sick of being useful. She wanted to be good-for-nothing, exotic. "If I must have coils, I'll be a Fury with a head wreathed in snakes."

"Medusa, I think—though I got my education too long ago to— What are you going to do about the car?"

"The car?" If Mrs. Starling couldn't peck at one thing, she'd peck at another.

"Yes. Now you no longer have your brother to drive you."

"Henry was good about that." Miss Eva dried the teapot with care. He had been glad to take her to the Hingham glass club because of the little inn where he could sit and enjoy himself all afternoon. "You have your glass, I'll have mine," he said. It was his one pleasure, except for Mrs. Wake, of course. "He just didn't like marketing, or sitting outside waiting while I made a visit," Miss Eva went on, "and I don't much blame him." Little by little she had given up friends, the few that were left, for her best friends had been Mama's age. She had none now except for the three on Shadbush Lane and they were friends by chance and location rather than by choice.

"How you've lived this long without learning to drive a car is more than I can understand."

"It never seemed necessary in the old days, and Mama didn't think it was a lady's place to drive." She was silent, setting that remark up and studying it. Dated, it was, "What a lady does or doesn't do—how quaint that sounds!" she said.

"Lady is an epithet these days. What did I hear that college girl saying—the one Mrs. Wake had down last summer, though why she needs help more in the summer than in the winter is beyond me? 'Don't call me a lady,' she shouted at that young chap always hanging around there."

"Yes, ideas have changed." But mine, she thought, have

mine changed? Could I change them? What good would it do? Ideas are not so important as one's body, and I couldn't change that. It's dated. With that it came over Miss Eva that she hadn't really looked at her body in twenty years. Maybe longer. She set the last cup on the counter and began to dry the saucers. "I shall have driving lessons," she said. "Though I probably know just what to do. I've seen Henry at the wheel so often. And long ago Otto used to let me drive sometimes when nobody was along but me."

"Otto! Lazy, fat thing. Backed into my lilac hedge out of pure inertia. Couldn't get his foot to the brake in time, and your Papa paying him fifteen dollars a week. Outrageous."

"Otto was better at driving horses; used to take Papa to the station every morning, you remember. But I don't want a chauffeur. I want to be able to come and go when I please." She might drive to—to Mexico! Excitement swept through her and she gave the last dishes a swift polish and set them aside with a clatter.

"I just hope you don't kill yourself. The highways are a menace."

"I don't mind danger. I've reached the dangerous age."

"Well! I wonder if you realize the implications of that phrase."

"I realize what I mean. Anybody as old as I am has reached the time of life when he should risk it—he has so little time to lose. Youth is the time for caution, age is the time for adventure."

Mrs. Starling gave a little bleat of laughter. "You don't seem to realize that eventually people lose their taste for the risky. Haven't you ever seen old folks walk? Like a basket of eggs, the bones so brittle."

Miss Eva threw the dish towel down on the counter. "Let them break, I don't care." The old wet blanket, the old dash of cold water, the——

"Well, really! But I suppose I shouldn't hold you accountable. You're still upset and grieving, don't know what you're saying."

Miss Eva picked up the dish towel and hung it neatly on the rack. She didn't know what had got into her, saying things

like that to Mrs. Starling, of all people. "You know how I talk sometimes, just run on like I used to, to amuse Mama," she said lightly. "Come on into the sitting-room where you can have a comfortable chair and a cup of coffee."

"I haven't time to be comfortable this morning."

"Then we'll just sit at the kitchen table—the sun shines in nicely there." And it would be nearer the door. She was all at once in a fury of haste to get the woman out of the house. Maybe she would go when she had had her coffee. She hustled her out of the kitchen.

"Well, now you've got it poured." Mrs. Starling sat down and examined Grandmother Morton's coin-silver teaspoon with care before she helped herself to sugar. "I wonder you've never married, Miss Eva," she said, giving her a sharp glance across the table.

Miss Eva set her cup down. "Scalding hot, look out," she said, giving herself a moment to recover from the question that had taken her by surprise. She felt the colour mount to her cheeks—indignation boiling up, that was all.

"Blushing like a young girl," Mrs. Starling said, "well, what do you know! Could be a hot flush, of course."

"I'm through with all that nonsense," Miss Eva said, taking refuge in the remark she had heard so many women make in that connection. But nonsense? Nonsense? Maybe so, for a woman who had had five children and wanted no more. For herself, it was a tragedy, though at the time she had scarcely given it a thought. That had been Papa's last difficult year when nothing and nobody could please him.

"Pardon me, I'm sure, for asking such a question," Mrs. Starling went on. "None of my business if you've been married as many times as Mrs. Wake."

Miss Eva seized on Mrs. Wake as a welcome digression, though once off on that subject there was no telling when Mrs. Starling would go home. "Come now, we mustn't exaggerate. We know positively of only two marriages."

"Then why is her silver marked one way and her linen another and neither one a W?"

"Any number of reasons. The things might have been inherited—."

"That kind of silver? And what's more, that collection of dolls she has, one of them with diamond eyes. Now I ask you, what husband in his right mind, certainly what New England husband, would give his wife such a thing?"

Miss Eva chuckled. "Maybe he wasn't in his right mind. I'm afraid you just don't trust the woman."

"To tell you the truth, I don't. Haven't you ever noticed how there are times, when she's being her properest, that she drops that Southern-honey talk and comes out with a pseudo-English accent?"

"Well, yes, but——"

Mrs. Starling sank her voice to a dramatic whisper. "The stage—that's where she learned it. Oh, I tell you there's more to that woman's life than ever any of us will know!"

Miss Eva set down her coffee cup. That was just what she herself wanted. Now at last she knew. She wanted to have more to her life than Mrs. Starling would ever know. She turned a laugh into a cough and said, "She was very kind to Brother Henry. Used to play gin rummy with him, you know." Summer evenings when the windows were open, she had heard them laughing together. She had not known that Henry could laugh, really laugh till then. What about? She had wondered more than once. "I was so happy for Henry to have some amusement," she went on. But it had been more than gin rummy, more even than laughter. She had heard him creeping up the stairs when he thought she was sound asleep, coming back long after midnight. He needn't have tiptoed, poor Henry, so proper and careful! To tell the truth, maybe she had envied him that companionship, that—whatever it was.

"She the kind that's brighter with men than with women, if you know what I mean, and can't get over it no matter how old she is."

Miss Eva sipped her coffee and did not commit herself one way or the other. At the moment what she wanted most in this world was to have Mrs. Starling go. There was all of a sudden so much she had to think about. She had to collect herself into herself, see what she really was. There were other things she had to consider, too, things she had always taken

for granted—Mama, Papa and what there was hidden under the surface of their lives.

"Thank you for the coffee, I'm sure." Mrs. Starling was rising at last. She buttoned up her brown coat, tied a black scarf over her head. "Real mild this morning, but my neuralgia——" and at the door she added, "I'm glad to see you're holding up."

"One has to," Miss Eva responded, resorting gratefully to the trite, the expected reply.

Mrs. Starling paused with her hand on the doorknob. "It wouldn't surprise me," she said darkly, "it wouldn't surprise me one bit if you kicked over the traces some day."

"Well, if I do, I won't leave a trace around to show, I assure you," Miss Eva remarked and waved her guest out of the house.

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Miss Eva leaned against the kitchen door and drew a long breath. Now she would not have to see anyone till they all came for bridge at two. Her eyes went to the little round clock set in a saucepan frame and hung above the stove—four whole wonderful hours. Why did she tolerate Mrs. Starling? she wondered. Maybe it was because she was so old one felt young beside her. But forget her now, for heaven's sake! She looked round the kitchen, the one room which she herself had modernized, a few years ago, after the servants left—white refrigerator, shining sink, red mica counters, dark-red linoleum, a table with books and a rocking chair, gay red curtains. All red and white, like the friendly cow I love with all my heart—Miss Eva gave herself a shake. Had she arrived at solitude only to spend it repeating nursery rhymes? Was she in her second childhood? In any case, before she could do anything, she had to make sandwiches, arrange the tea tray and have all in readiness for her bridge-playing guests. Usually it was a pleasant task and she enjoyed contriving new things, flavouring, tasting. But today she went at it in a fury of haste.

At last all was ready. She hung up her apron, went through the butler's pantry and suddenly, having achieved leisure, was at a loss to know what to do with it. In the back hall she pushed up the thermostat because Mrs. Wake would be chilly as usual, walked on slowly to the sitting-room where sunshine streamed in through lace-curtained windows, making shabby the once handsome carpet, the green plush-covered chairs and Mama's platform rocker close by the window. From there she had looked out summer and winter through the twisted, down-drooping branches of the hornbeam tree, beyond the bay which did not interest her—"mud flats and shallow water," she said—beyond the thin line of dunes—"I wish a storm would wash them away," she said—to seek a mast or smoke-stack on the open sea. How like her it was, to be forever looking to the far horizon! Even old and ill Mama was always a romantic figure to Miss Eva, glamorous, all the things she herself had never been.

As she stared down at the empty chair Miss Eva could still see her sitting there as she was in the last years of her life, fragile, delicate, colourless, hands stilled on the arms of her chair, blue-corded veins with stagnating blood that ran slower and slower each day. Then strangely superimposed on this figure came another, vivid, animated—Mama just in from a walk along the shore, still wearing the red Shaker cape Grandma had bought her the year the Shakers had a shop at Gloucester. There was high colour in her cheeks, dark eyes were flashing and the red hood, fallen back to her shoulders, showed dark hair wind-blown and wild. She was lifting one hand to bring a clenched fist down on the arm of the chair. "I will not endure it, Walter. This time it is too much!"

Miss Eva, little Eva then, had been caught, held motionless on the stairs by the strange, the overpowering sense of tension which had spread out from sitting-room to hall, which froze her there, heart pounding hard. Papa's voice had come to her, subdued, all the hearty booming quality of it struck down before Mama's anger. "I'm sorry, Emma. I didn't mean you to—" "To find out? Do you take me for a fool?" Then silence, while little Eva clung to the newel post hearing the clocks tick as they were ticking now. At last Papa cleared his

throat. "Well, Emma . . . Lucia is at college till June. Why not take little Eva and go for the spring in Paris?" Holding her breath she had waited, waited for Mama's reply. "I shall," Mama said, rising.

That had been her first crossing. Mama was young then, younger far than I am now, Miss Eva thought. She turned and crossed the wide front hall to stand in the doorway of the drawing-room that had not been used for so many years. Gilt and rose brocade, mahogany, carved loveseats, tasselled lampshades held like umbrellas by china figurines—and again she remembered another Mama, this time seated at the grand piano playing softly, wearing one of her Paris gowns of cool, cool silver with a red rose at her bosom, bare shoulders gleaming in candle and firelight. Mistletoe, holly—it must have been a Christmas party—and Papa, white-waistcoated, beaming, ruddy, taking out his big Swiss watch that struck chimes every quarter hour, saying, "It's time they were coming." Then as Mama played on—some intricate piece of runs and trills and crossing of hands—he had bent and kissed her bare shoulders saying, "You look lovely tonight, my dear." The rippling notes had ended in a discordant crash as Mama's hands fell to her lap and her body stiffened. She rose. "Pipe, pipe, I shall not dance." Then she had seen the two girls in the doorway. "Lucia!" she cried, the warmth of her voice all the greater by contrast with the coldness it had held. "How that dress becomes you! I knew I was making no mistake when I chose the yellow *crêpe de Chine*. Turn round, let me see." And Lucia, dark and glowing, had twirled about, showing off her beauty, her dress, her slender shape. Then Mama, with yet another change of tone: "Little Eva! You look like a meal sack tied round the middle. Why must you tie your sash so tight? Come here, let me fix it."

Mama had adored Lucia, headstrong, daring Lucia who left a note on her pillow, not even addressed to Mama, saying, "I can't help it, Papa. There's no other way. You know. I'm sorry." Lucia who ran off with an outsider, a Westerner who took her away from Mama ("What does she mean, there is no other way?" Mama said), who let her get influenza ("Her throat was ~~always~~ delicate," Mama said) and let her die ("He

killed her, my lovely child," Mama said). Then was when she had turned to little Eva. "But you will never leave me, will you? Promise?" And Eva, in her last year at college, had been proud to be turned to, to be needed, wanted, leaned on, made much of, essential at last. And really it had not been hard to keep the promise. There had been nowhere for her to go, nothing else for her to do.

There might have been—but Miss Eva would not let that ghost return. She put it from her and passed on through the hall and back to the library, dark even on this sunny day and smelling of musty books, leather-covered, Papa's law-books, for he had set out to be a lawyer, then gone into business. Brown leather chairs were drawn up before a dead cheerless hearth. The only gay thing in the room was a red Venetian glass decanter on the centre table. Miss Eva rested one hand on the chilly back of a chair and looked up over the mantel mirror to the high-hung portraits.

Mama, Mama, how beautiful you were, how secret, how sad your eyes! Had they never laughed? At once, out of the darkness of forgotten memory, another picture rose before her, dimly at first and gathering sharpness as she stood there staring up at the portrait. Sunlight came to her first, flowers in the square, a fat woman in wooden shoes with a string of gay balloons—Paris, that first trip. Three balloons she had chosen, red, yellow, green. Miraculously they were in her hand tugging at their strings. If she let go they would rise, rise over the rooftops, over the white clouds that floated in the blue sky, and shrivel to a crisp when they touched the sun. Someone had told her that as they bounced over the cobblestones in an open barouche, the coachman high behind her, seen as she leaned back, seeming to bounce and sway with the balloons. Who had told her that? Someone who sat beside Mama, holding the red parasol over her head, someone who made her eyes dance with life and laughter and who filled the very air with electric gaiety when he leaned toward her, saying something in French, one hand on her knee— Miss Eva, standing there before the portrait, stiffened, drew back from that memory. A hand on her knee? In those days a man didn't lay a hand on a lady's knee. Especially Mama,

of all people, who shrank from Papa's touch, who held herself so high, so apart from— Why, it was impossible! Memory must be playing her tricks.

Yet Mama had laughed that day. And another time too. Miss Eva dug back deep and far, this time, into a silvered darkness—moonlight in a long rectangle on the hotel-room carpet, the feel of her own hard bed with high pillows and bolster, a bed that rounded up precariously in the middle so that she woke with a cry, catching herself back from rolling off. It was then, sleep-befuddled, that she had heard Mama's laughter, a deeper echo of it and the pl-ump of something dropping to the floor. Papa's shoe? But this was Paris. Papa was not in Paris. Mama's "Sh-sh, darling," she had taken as an answer to her cry. But was it? Was it? Oh, God, she groaned, what is the matter with me? What am I doing, what am I imagining?

Miss Eva passed a cold hand across her forehead, but still a little longer she went on probing. There were many things about that trip which she remembered clearly—the six weeks at the sisters' school in Bruges while Mama went to the Spa, and she remembered that when they got home Papa said, "Ah, I told you the change would do you good!" to which Mama replied with indifference, "The waters, perhaps," and closed up, more secret and withdrawn than before. Miss Eva shook her head and turned away. Let it be, let it be, look no farther. The dead had earned their privacy.

At the door she gave one glance back at Papa's portrait. How open and uncomplex he seemed, compared to Mama! Just a hearty, 'fleshy, fleshly man of quick emotion, easily amused. But why had she to be concerning herself with these two, dead and gone, no longer a part of her life? Was it because she had no life of her own to be remembered? She left the library, walked through the hall, where a grandfather clock went tick-tock with a hollow echoing sound, mounted the stair, one hand on the polished cherry rail, and at the turn passed a second tall clock that said tock-tick, contradicting the other, making a muddle and a confusion out of time, throwing it all topsy-turvy, asserting, refuting. Like her own thoughts.

In the wide open hall upstairs she paused to look at closed doors. Here on her right was Mama's and Papa's room, though Mama slept always in her so-called study, out in the ell. Opposite was Lucia's old room; then, with a bath between, Brother Henry's, on the front. Across the hall from him, separated by the little sewing room, was her own room. Miss Eva sighed. As long as the doors remained closed she could imagine the rooms still occupied. Open, they were too cavernous, too undeniably empty.

The heat was coming up, thumping in the radiators as she went from back hall to bathroom to hang up guest towels and see that all was in order for the afternoon. Poor Mrs. Hildon would have to climb the stairs at least twice, arthritis and all. There really should be a bath on the first floor.

Coming out into the passageway again, Miss Eva was halted, caught by yet another vagrant memory—herself in a long flannelette nightgown, tiptoeing away from the bathroom where she had been sick from eating clams or something. Just here it was that, leaning weakly against the wall, she had been held transfixed by the sound of someone else up and abroad in the deepest hour of the night. Not Mama. She would be sleeping out in the ell where she had moved to escape the sound of water lap-lapping on the shore. "A lively wave, real surf breaking would lull me to sleep, but these slow small sounds I cannot bear," she said.

Frozen there in the dark, little Eva had waited, listening to that secret, eager, slippered step coming down the main hall, across the passage, out to Mama's door. Gently the knob was turned, released, turned again more noisily. A knock, another and Papa's urgent whisper, "Emma, Emma!" Only silence answered him. The doorknob rattled once more, then the whispering step and the angry mutter, "Damn it! Goddamn it to hell!" Even now, remembering, Miss Eva felt again the cold, sinking sensation in the pit of her stomach, the sense of something unknown, imperative, pressing down on, into her. And when that had passed she thought for the first time in her life, "Poor Papa!"

For she had over many years felt only impatience with him. Why must he keep teasing at Mama, bothering her? Why must

he, especially if there were guests, stop by her chair to lay a hand on her shoulder—making a show of his affection, it had seemed? Or if they were side by side on the sofa, why did he have to put an arm around her waist, laughing, saying, "Come now, Emmy, tell us what you think. You read that book . . ." or: "You went there on your last trip." And Mama, because of company, had to bear his touch. She could not say as at other times, "You know I can't stand being fussed over," and move away. Or again, just "Walter!" in that quick, sharp, breathless way she had.

Miss Eva moved down the hall toward her own room. This seemed to be her day for remembering odd things, she thought with a wry smile. The other days since Henry's death had been too filled for remembering—arrangements to be made, telegrams sent and received, the funeral, and after that letters to be written and answered.

Her own room, neat, tidy, familiar, seemed blank, unlike the other rooms of the house, unhaunted, as if no one lived in it, as if no one had ever lived in it, really lived. There was the spinet desk Mama had bought her when she was in college, the rose-ruffled dressing-table, the old mahogany chest with a brass rail around the top, the bookcase with her childhood books crowded to one side by Mama's paper-back French novels, and her own recent books, in their jackets, for she had had to buy, order from Boston, all the years when it was too difficult to get to the lending library. Yes, everything was here just as usual, yet her mind was not stayed or reassured by it. She was in a turmoil. Her hands were cold, her knees weak from all this remembering. Stop it, stop it. That's all past and gone, it has nothing to do with now, with this moment. Or with me, she thought.

But me, Miss Eva demanded of the empty room, what about me? What am I? She shook her head. There was only blankness, a ghastly nothingness. But why, why? It was the years, the swift and terrible years going by unnoticed, filled with odds and ends of small happenings, the years that had robbed her, left her a void. Oh, couldn't someone have told her before it was too late that time passes and does not return, that one is young and then in a moment old beyond repair? It's not

just from life to death that one passes in a twinkling, it is from youth to age! She flung around and went downstairs again, seeking something to do, anything, to stop her from thinking.

But there she could only move about restlessly from one room to another, finally to the library again. How old was she, not by years—she knew that all too well—but by outward aspect? When had she really examined her own face, seen it as something more than just that vague blur around which she arranged her hair or below which she fastened her collar? She moved to the tall pier glass between the two north windows. Cold light, filtered through the cedars that screened them from Mrs. Wake's house next door, fell full on her face. She scowled at her reflection, seeing the lines sharply etched around mouth and eyes, seeing the crepy look of the soft skin under her chin, seeing how mousy her brown hair had grown, how plainly, how meekly it was drawn back to a knot at the nape of her neck, seeing how her face had widened—"Old hag!" she cried aloud. "But I'm not like that really, not me, the real me, the spirit inside. I don't feel like that. And my body isn't like that, it's young and strong and vigorous—or is it?"

When had she looked at her body, seen it stark-naked as it really was? People didn't look at themselves so, and since she had given up swimming—why, she had not seen herself, her body undraped, unhampered by garments in heaven only knew how many years. Then swiftly, as if it had been lying in wait to torment her, a picture flashed before her—home from swimming, no, from a sail, in her teens maybe, for there was a time in there when she had lost her baby plumpness and had not yet added the poundage of maturity, upstairs in her own room, passing the mirror on her way to the closet for dry clothes, the sea-wet garments in a heap on the floor, she had seen herself, caught one glimpse and been stayed by it, held entranced by something lovely, pure, spiritual, and yet of the flesh too, with an aura, a glow, a patina as delicate as the sheen of a ripe peach or a plum, intangible, beautiful. That was what she had seen. And what was she now?

With trembling fingers she jerked off the red scarf, the black jersey, the plain grey skirt. She stripped to the skin, here in

the dark library where no naked body had ever stood exposed to books, to leather chairs, to formality, to the decent and restrained orderliness of living. Then standing where the harsh northern light fell full on her, flinching away yet forcing herself to look, Miss Eva Iveson stared at herself. A caricature, that's what she was, a cruel caricature of that other naked lovely self she remembered. Heavy, heavy, mature, settled, spread. "God, no!" she cried. "That isn't me, the real me. Inside I am young and gay and slim and lovely, leaping, eager, full of life and longing for more life. God, how can it be that I am caught, bound, forever imprisoned in this revolting flesh? I didn't know—I didn't mean to be like this. How can it be? How did it happen?"

Tears burned their way down her cheeks, stung her lips. What had done this to her? Who—her eyes lifted to Mama's portrait. "Eat, keep up your strength, thin people are nervous, it's your calm that comforts me," Mama had said. "You must not fail me as Lucia did. Never lower your standards, never compromise. . . . I wouldn't let him call again, he's not worthy of you. . . . Of course some day, when I am gone, I want you to have your own home—with a suitable person," Mama had said. Some day? What day? This day? Now, like this? Who would want her now?

Elmer had wanted her once, Elmer, working his way through college, tutoring her in Maths that last term, gay lovely Elmer who had singled her out from all the others, only heaven knew why. But when he came down to visit, he seemed altered, this heart of her heart—yes, call him that, use all the old trite sentimental phrases on him, for that was what he was. He came down and he was at once an alien, awkward, ridiculous, Mama saying, "A competent tutor no doubt, but have you noticed how his ears stand out?" And she questioned him about his home, making it seem small and dull and common. "His eyes, Eva, have you noticed?" And she smiled her special little smile. "His eyes remind me of soft fried eggs, so soulful." Later, abroad—for that was the time they went for six months and stayed two years—she would ask, "Any news from S.F.E.?" There was nothing but the announcement of his marriage, waiting on her desk when they came home at last.

"It was you, you who did this to me," Miss Eva cried, her eyes ablaze, fastened on Mama's, so cool, so aloof, so—so selfish. That was it—selfish! She reached out, seized the rose-coloured decanter, lifted it high, but a thought stayed her hand, deflected her aim. It was the years, too, that had done this to her. "Damn you, and damn the years!" she cried as the decanter smashed and splintered on the hearth.

The sound, the bright broken glass on the bricks, brought her back to sanity, and, turning again to the mirror, she saw herself still caught in that attitude of desperation, of tensed muscle, of extended arm and furious glance. That's me, too, she thought. Power, I have power. I am really a violent woman, I, Eva Iveson, so correct, so proper, always saying the expected, the trite, the commonplace word, always doing the conventional, the proper thing, always the dutiful daughter, I, Eva Iveson, I am a violent woman! And suddenly the incongruity, the very ridiculousness of it swept over her in cleansing, releasing laughter. And in that moment, seeing her reflection in the long pier glass, she found an alteration, an amelioration of its cruelty. In spite of the flesh, something of her inner spirit was there. Laughter had wrought a magic on the heaviness of her body, on her face that was lighted up, transformed, made alive and vivid, the lines wiped out, the eyes grown large and dark. There's something there still, Miss Eva thought with wonder. God knows what, but it's there. Then she bent and gathered up her clothes and went slowly out to the hall, up the stairs.

In her own room, looking around like someone coming out of a daze, she asked herself if she could be losing her mind. Or was this just some inevitable period of adjustment that would lead to resignation, to acceptance? Some private trial through which she must pass before she could emerge like Mrs. Starling, Mrs. Wake, Mrs. Hildon and all the other lone women she had known? Had they too gone through this secret struggle with reality, this stripping of soul and body? If so, they had not told, not even Mrs. Wake who was often so disconcertingly unashamed of emotion.

She glanced down at her naked body, seeing now in this bright room how smooth and flawless her skin was, seeing in

the warm sunlight how alive she looked. In her own mirror she saw that she was only a little thick through the middle, not really fat, that her breasts were firm and shapely still, her shoulder line good, spine straight, legs—well really now, my legs aren't bad at all, she thought. But she was too white. Once whiteness was prized. Now it had a sickly look. She would like to get browned all over, the way the young were nowadays. Her eyes turned to the door, long closed, that led to the upper octagonal room of the tower, the glassed-in sun-room. She flung the door wide—how warm it was in here, for there was a radiator on one wall and the sun streamed in. It was a secret eyrie, high as the top of the hornbeam tree, remote and still, the sound of small waves breaking on the shore, like the tick of a clock in an empty room, only magnifying the stillness. Beyond the bay, beyond the spit of sand, the darker sea was visible and two freighters on the far horizon. Miss Eva pushed aside a pile of yellowed magazines, moved two wicker chairs and pulled the long couch across into the full sunlight. Then she lay down on it and closed her eyes.

Now, now, she was alone, reduced to the essential self, as she was born, as she must die. Stripped of all trappings—no, hairpins. And amused by the notion that hairpins hampered her solitude, she removed them one by one, shaking loose the small bun at the nape of her neck, spreading her hair. She took up one strand and studied it. Still brown in the sun with little glints of grey that, viewed without prejudice, really enlivened it. She drew a long breath and lay relaxed, motionless, the sun a warm hand that stroked her. Slowly a sense of freedom came over her—not just of body breathing in every pore, but of spirit released. The sun is still mine, she thought, the bare branches, the sea. They are a part of me and I of them. Warmth enters into me, space is my home. I run with the waves alongshore. I turn with a sea-gull, white with the dip of wings, black as he soars against the sky. I lie with a white cloud, diaphanous and weightless, penetrable by air and sun.

Downstairs the grandfather clock struck twelve. Miss Eva awoke. She waited till the second clock echoed the hour and yet at the same time denied it, two times at war with each

other—youth and age fighting it out? She rolled over—a pig on a spit, she thought—and dozed again. Another hour before she must get dressed for bridge. Never mind lunch, she'd skip it till she lost this heaviness through the middle, till she felt as light and supple as the spirit within her. Every day she would lie in the sun, and later, when windows could be open, get a proper tan. She would gather to herself the glow of the sun, secret and warming to spirit and body alike, a reinforcement to that essential self which she had just begun to explore.

3

MRS. STARLING as usual was the first to arrive. She stood by the window in the sitting-room looking out while Miss Eva set up the bridge table. "I don't see why in the world you don't cut down that scraggly old tree. It blocks the view—a twisted, horrid thing, an offence to the eye," she said.

"Cut down that tree? Why, Mama——" She caught herself up. "I mean to say, I like it. It's so reliable and strong. Oh, it tosses about in a northeaster but still it stands, tough, firm-rooted. Like character. Like integrity."

"Now, now, don't get all fanciful over a tree, for heaven's sake! Dr. S. used to say, yes, even a cabbage in its own way has intelligence, but no need of getting upset about it till it starts upsetting the stomach. He said it a thousand times, if he said it once."

Miss Eva came and stood beside her. It was low tide now, and where the water had drained away, the mud flats lay shining like wet putty under the sun, the channel a bright-blue slash across the surface. "They used to make mortar and pestle for the apothecaries out of hornbeam wood," she went on. "That's how it got its name—hard as horn. And the crooked branches are all ready-shaped by nature for the yokes oxen used to wear. When I look at that tree, I get a real sense of history, of continuity."

"All right, have a pair of oxen and hack off a yoke—though personally I prefer my old Ford—and it's none of my business

if you want to obstruct your view. It's yours to do with as you like, I dare say."

"Yes, it is mine." So was the house and all that was in it, herself included, most of all herself.

Mrs. Starling peering out, tart and rigid as a bottle of vinegar, said, "Can you tell me why short-necked women always wear long-haired furs? See, there she comes. Look at her, how she walks, leading with her nose. Reminds me of that fat little terrier of mine—Eliza, remember? I never had her attended to. Had that same preeny prowly look, as if she were sniffing around for something. Though why a woman of her age"—she moved away from the window as Mrs. Wake turned in at Miss Eva's gate—"why she should keep pruning her feathers as if somebody was noticing is more than I for one can say."

"Just a hang-over from that Past you insist on giving her," Miss Eva teased. "Though for all we know it may be pure as the driven snow. No, I shouldn't say snow—it's so often muddy and messy. Pure as a pear blossom."

"Full of bugs and borers, if you ask me. I've got two in the back garden. But I wish I knew what made a woman like Mrs. Wake suddenly drop her life, wherever and whatever it was—and I'm sure I have no wish to pry—and come here, buy this cottage made out of the old Hildon barn and settle down to a quiet conventional life. She bends over backward being as proper as a widow's bonnet. But she can't hold her tongue, and that walk of hers—that gives her away. Swishes like a bustle." Mrs. Starling gave a little snort, crossed to the fireplace, took up the tongs, and began rearranging the logs on the fire.

Miss Eva laughed as she finished snapping the cover on the card table and went to get the cards from the old Governor Winthrop desk. "She doesn't really talk so much, just gives one a feeling she's about to. And supposing she has a past—whatever that means—it might just be that she wanted a different sort of life, for a change. Why shouldn't she have it?" Even I, Miss Eva thought, perhaps even I could change if I took the notion. From propriety to—to what? Inebriety? Loose living? "She has a perfect right—and I for one admire her for it."

"I'm the last one to deny anyone his rights. But rights are not always right. Have you no principles?"

"I don't know," Miss Eva replied thoughtfully. "Mine have never been really put to the test."

"Nonsense! Every day of one's life is a test. Anyway, I am glad Mrs. Wake is only a provisional member of the bridge club."

Miss Eva smiled to herself as she moved toward the door to greet her guest. They had had a great discussion about Mrs. Wake three years ago after Mrs. Grew, their usual fourth, went into a nursing home over in Taunton. Mrs. Starling had been bitterly opposed to her admission to their little group. "We know nothing about her, nothing. Personally I'd rather play with a dummy." Miss Eva said, "But she's been living right here beside us for six years and her behaviour has been most discreet." To that Mrs. Starling snapped, "Too discreet, if you know what I mean." Then Mrs. Hildon said, "She's a good bridge player and as you say, Miss Eva, she's right here, handy. Why not make her a provisional member? Like the Junior League, you know." And that had lent to a doubtful deed a flavour of respectability, even of social distinction."

Mrs. Starling was muttering under her breath now. "Comes right in, without even so much as a knock."

"Come in, Mrs. Wake," Miss Eva called, as if she had knocked or been about to knock.

Mrs. Wake, her short reddish-grey hair in a tousle as usual, red-fox fur slung around her thick, hunched shoulders, gave Miss Eva an embrace that ended abruptly, as if she had let herself go more than she meant to. "Poor dear, truly a great loss and my heart has ached. But you've been mighty brave about it. Oh, this wonderful New England control! Now me, I'd have just bust loose and——" Then all at once, standing there by the door of the living-room, her eyes went round the hallway, searched the empty stair, and her voice went flat. "I've lost my best—my best partner at gin rummy. I miss him mightily."

Mrs. Starling turned from the fire and gave her a startled look as if there might be something almost indecent in the

emotion her last words had expressed so simply, without affectation. But all she said was "Good afternoon. Did you see anything of Mrs. Hildon as you came down the lane?"

Before Mrs. Wake could answer, Miss Eva said, "You were very kind to my brother."

"Honey"—Mrs. Wake threw off her fur, handed it to Miss Eva, shaking her head at the offer to take her coat, too—"I know a lonely man when I see one." Then turning to Mrs. Starling she added, "No, I didn't see hair nor hide of Mrs. Hildon."

"Hair nor hide?" Mrs. Starling repeated.

"I mean—well, it's just an old Southern expression. You don't take it literally. It means——"

"I gather the meaning from the context, thank you."

Miss Eva, hanging the fur on the hat-rack in the front hall, stood a moment alone there in thought. Henry lonely? To her he had seemed utterly self-sufficient, her older brother, complete, undemanding, closed off. They really had not had much in common even in childhood, for he had been over ten years her senior, had gone off to college before she was old enough to take much interest in him; then he had been less and less at home, especially after his marriage and going into practice with his father-in-law in Chicago. He had never been gay and expensive as Papa had often been, and these last years had not brought them any closer. But lonely? He had read—science-fiction was his delight and his den was lined with books in lurid covers. He had had his own radio and certain programmes he listened to regularly. He had seemed strangely contented here, not needing her. Yet he had needed Mrs. Wake, had turned to her. I never really understood him, she thought, coming slowly back into the sitting-room.

"She's getting very absent-minded," Mrs. Starling was saying. "Maybe you'd better ring up and remind her—like as not she's forgotten."

"Do sit down, Mrs. Wake," Miss Eva said. "I'll see if Mrs. Hildon's on the way. Yes, there she is, stopping to put a great stack of letters in her mailbox."

"Probably letters to her eight—or is it nine?—grand-children." Mrs. Wake sighed. "Oh, how I envy her—me with

nary a chick! 'Tisn't as if I hadn't given myself every chance—I mean, it's just that some of us are not blessed with——"

"Seems like ninety when the whole mob comes for the summer with her," Mrs. Starling put in. "How she puts up with the noise and confusion——"

Miss Eva had turned from the window and was looking at Mrs. Wake. "Did you want children?"

Mrs. Wake nodded and for the second time that afternoon her face under the pancake make-up, a wide, shrewd and yet generous face, took on a look of wistfulness. "Once I almost——"

"Please spare us the clinical details," Mrs. Starling said briskly. "After forty years in a small Vermont village as a doctor's wife, I really cannot find any further appetite for obstetrics. Pardon me if I speak out. I'm not one to avoid calling a spade a spade."

Miss Eva turned back to the window. Usually she spread oil on the waters these two were always troubling every time they got together, but today, let them do what they pleased. She didn't care.

"I was only going to say——" Mrs. Wake's now rather plaintive drawl was again interrupted.

"Please don't misunderstand me. I have nothing against children, and heaven knows there was never a son more adored than my Amos—till he married that girl. But I am thankful my two grandchildren—and two is a plenty in these times—live in California. I don't care to see them till they've got old enough to clean up after themselves and show some respect for their elders."

"Why, I thought they were both grown. Surely you have told us——"

"No one is grown until he learns consideration for others."

Miss Eva watched Mrs. Hildon turn in at the gate and come lumbering up the walk, leaning heavily on her cane. Even now, not knowing herself observed, she kept her determinedly cheerful expression. Her real staff, Miss Eva thought, was not the stout cane she used but her indomitable serenity, her resolute concentration on the bright side of things. There were times when it seemed false, too patently superimposed,

and again, as if assuming the semblance of a thing in some mysterious manner created the reality, Mrs. Hildon appeared to be as honestly cheerful as she pretended. Perhaps it was a little game she played with herself, her way of getting along. Everyone had to have some way of getting along. Mrs. Starling, now, how did she manage? By perching on a limb and pecking first at one side, then the other, by being salty and plain-spoken to the point of shocking people—like a small boy who has just learned some bad words and takes pleasure in their effect on proper grownups. Mrs. Wake? Well, she had her memories, maybe, and the fun of acting, pretending to be something she was not—and she lived vicariously in the love affairs of the college girls she had summer after summer. And me, Miss Eva asked herself, giving a deaf ear to the talk going on behind her, what about me? How am I going to manage? She saw the years ahead, bleak and empty. Was her only salvation in some similar self-deceiving prop, some kind of pretending? That's what it had come down to with the others. But she didn't want a prop. No, she was not going to deceive herself if she had to meet the years stripped, bare, defenceless. She would take her future straight. "I'll take it straight," Henry had said so many times, or "On the rocks, little Eva." Was that where she was headed, toward shipwreck on the rocks?

"I do like to begin on time," Mrs. Starling was saying, as Miss Eva moved toward the door.

"Time?" Mrs. Wake responded. "Lord, the last thing I worry about is time! As we say down south, there's a whole day tomorrow that ain't touched yet."

"Speak for yourself, please. Ever at my back I hear time's winged chariot hurrying near. At eighty, one has no time to waste dillydallying."

"I don't mind dillying, and as for dallying——" Mrs. Wake murmured.

Heavens, Miss Eva thought, at the front door now, Mrs. Wake was really letting herself go today! Usually she at least tried to be careful of everything she said—starting a sentence, then breaking it off unfinished. She flung open the door.

"Ah, Miss Eva," Mrs. Hildon cried in her hearty, deep voice, "a lovely day. So nice to come. I hear you, Mrs. Starling. I

know you're fussing about my being late. You may start dealing this minute. I'm right here."

Miss Eva took Mrs. Hildon's camel-hair coat and hung it up on hanger and rack. It was lovely material, beautifully tailored, as was her powder-blue suit, her plain, expensive blouse. Big and heavy as Mrs. Hildon was—could it be that fat rather than philosophy kept her face as unlined as a baby's?—she always had style, without being over-New York-ish. And that in spite of her figure. It was as if, having discharged her duty toward New England taste and simplicity, she felt free to expand within her neat garments, to relax and spread without restraint. Mrs. Starling was always saying, "If she would only pull up her corset strings! That is, if she wears one—which I doubt."

Mrs. Wake exclaimed as they all moved toward the bridge table, "A new suit, Mrs. Hildon?"

Mrs. Hildon plunged into her chair, let her cane drop, threw back her head and laughed, showing a complete set of large white teeth—"my full partial," she called them. Mrs. Starling always snorted at such an evasion of reality, saying, "I have false teeth. That's what they are and that's what I call them. My partials, my pearls, my appliances, my plate—my foot!" she scoffed. With the tip of her tongue now, Miss Eva felt the gap where she had lost two jaw teeth, explored the front tooth that ached a bit now and then and that the dentist over in Plymouth wanted to take out. "No, no, not a front tooth," Miss Eva had begged. "I would feel too bereft, diminished, brought low. Not yet, not yet."

"You know," Mrs. Hildon went on, "I am simply losing my mind. I do believe I am. I'm going to have to leave my entire wardrobe in full view all the time, closet doors wide. This is the second identical blue suit I've bought. Forgot I had last year's, went in shopping, saw this on the rack—what a bargain! I said. I just felt drawn to it as if we were meant for each other, as if we'd been acquainted in some previous incarnation. There, I said, just what I want! So I wore it home, so enchanted with it, ha, ha, and now I'm blessed if I haven't got twins."

"But, my dear," Mrs. Wake said, "if you'd go to one of those

little specialty shops such as I use, you wouldn't find the same suit a second year. Everything is planned out to be different. I'd recommend them to anyone. Why, if Miss Eva'd just put herself in their hands, let them fix her up, there's no telling——"

Miss Eva, passing the mints, gave a glance at Mrs. Wake's gold-studded yellow and chartreuse afternoon dress, visible under her open green coat. She wouldn't care to put herself in any such hands, or be so fixed up, she thought. Yet if Mrs. Wake got pleasure out of flamboyant clothes, why not? Everyone didn't have to wear grey and brown like Mrs. Starling.

"Thank you, Miss Eva, I do love to nibble," Mrs. Hildon said, taking two mints. "Yes, Mrs. Wake, I know I could go other places, only I've an account and I feel at home there. And, after all, one doesn't really plan to lose one's mind."

Mrs. Starling waved aside the mints. "The worst thing possible, this eating between meals. I've heard Dr. S. say it a thousand times. Think of the digestive tract, have a little consideration for the liver and spleen as well."

Mrs. Wake murmured something about clinical details, and Miss Eva said quickly, "We'll use this deck." At once the four fell into their regular pattern of play. "Your shuffle . . . cut, please . . . your deal . . . one spade . . . pass." The words dropped without a ripple into the silence of the room, dead words, unable to hurt or embitter, to warm or comfort, Miss Eva thought. Meaningless, impersonal and so tolerable. Here we sit, her thoughts ran on, four old women, our lives, such as they are, quiescent for the moment, our lives coiled neatly round our feet—Mrs. Starling's a hissing adder; Mrs. Hildon's, some plump harmless garden variety; Mrs. Wake's, a languorous tropical kind. Her own? She paused, arranging her cards, looked down, so carried away by her fancy that she half expected to find her own life under the rungs of her chair.

"Drop a card?" Mrs. Starling never missed anything.

"Oh, no, I'm sorry. I pass."

"Pass."

"Pass." . .

"Oh dear, shall I play it?"

They said all together, "No," and Mrs. Hildon said, "Deal with these, please."

Shuffle, cut, deal, it went again with bits of talk in between. How dull, how terribly dull! Miss Eva sighed. How sickening unto nausea was the acceptance, the unquestioning resignation of these women! How could they have given up like this? They had laid down their arms and surrendered. But they had borne arms, they had once been in the midst of life, involved in its tumult and glory. Glory? Well, a modicum of it—into each life some glory must fall. Was that why now they were able to bear the dull, the uneventful present, perhaps even to relish it? If so, it was no wonder that she herself, with only emptiness behind her, could not bear it. No wonder that she was seething with rebellion. And she was younger than they were, though she had gone along with them, living as they did for so many years that she had come to resemble them. An outsider, looking in, would see no difference. But there was, there was! All life was still bottled up inside her. Oh, if she could only draw the cork, let life burst forth like the genie from the fisherman's jar, to startle, to shock the very hell out of these old women saying, three hearts . . . three spades . . . on and on forever!

Suddenly Miss Eva felt their eyes on her, curious, concerned. "Let's see, where are we?"

"Waiting for you to bid," Mrs. Starling said sharply.

Miss Eva, collecting her wits, made a hit-or-miss bid. She saw Mrs. Hildon and Mrs. Wake exchange worried glances. They probably thought she was going batty or something. And maybe she was. "I was just thinking. I mean——"

"Ah, yes," Mrs. Wake sighed, "how one thinks, and listens for the sound of a vanished voice!" She always got her quotations wrong. If anyone corrected her, she only laughed as if it didn't really matter and said, "I picked up my literary education strictly by ear—my first husband was a scholar."

Mrs. Hildon said, "My dear Miss Eva, I do wish you would consider having a companion."

Watching the cards fall before her, gathering in a trick that Mrs. Hildon in her headlong way had dropped too near

to the edge of the table, Miss Eva was suddenly struck motionless. A companion! What a wonderful sweet-sounding word that was! It meant someone she could talk with, someone to whom she could speak out her inmost thoughts and longings.

"Well," Mrs. Starling announced, "they say it is not good to live alone. But as for me, I find it far better than living with some people."

"Now I have heard of just the woman for you, Miss Eva," Mrs. Hildon went on. "Of settled age but active still, a neat housekeeper, drives a car——"

"Oh, please!" That wasn't what companion meant. "No, no, not like that. I couldn't bear such a person forever under foot. Not now of all times when I've just begun to be—to——" She gave a startled glance around, catching herself up short. "I mean I really would not like it."

"They all talk too much, companions, housekeepers, practical nurses, the whole kit and caboodle," Mrs. Starling declared, rearranging her cards. "Chatter, chatter, chatter, or else they snoop, read your letters. Remember that series poor Mrs. Grew had before she gave up and went to the nursing home? By the way, it was leather her husband was in, wasn't it? I was reading something about the company in yesterday's *Herald* . . ." Her voice trailed off as she studied her cards.

Mrs. Wake gave a little giggle. "When I first came here and heard people say, 'He's in leather,' or 'He's in wool,' as your husband was, Mrs. Hildon, I just couldn't understand—I mean, it's really rather an odd expression, isn't it?"

No one answered, perhaps thinking it kinder to ignore her unfamiliarity with good New England idiom. "But even so," Mrs. Hildon persisted, "it would be someone in the house. That is very important. I don't know what I would do without my Lelia. Not so much for the work she does as her just being there."

Mrs. Wake said, "I'm sure I enjoy my college girl each summer. It keeps me in touch with youth. But summer is enough. After all, one has to lead one's own life."

Miss Eva looked across at her. Her own life. That was what she herself wanted. "You're right," she said with finality.

The game went on, more absorbing now. Mrs. Hildon

excused herself once, murmuring, "Oh dear, my bladder!" and lumbered off up the stairs, her cane striking *thump, thump* on each carpeted step as she mounted. Later the telephone rang and Miss Eva laid down her cards to go and answer. Behind her she could hear the subdued, disconnected conversation that goes on when people are really listening and yet trying not to seem to. She had known this call would come one of these days, as it had come after Mama's death, after Papa's. Such things had to be attended to and she was the one to do it, of course.

On coming back to the sitting-room, she brought with her a yet sharper sense of loss, of Brother Henry's being gone now more completely than ever. Soon—when she had cleared out his room—the place would be utterly empty of him, and of any service to be done him. She murmured an apology as she went to the desk and flipped through the pages of a loose-leaf calendar. "I must make note of the day before I forget—the thirteenth, two weeks from tomorrow. Mr. Whitman from the bank," she explained as she came back to her place, "about Henry's will and everything." Her eyes went over the cards on the table, she withdrew one from the fan in her hand, held it poised ready to play, then, conscious of some sudden tension in Mrs. Wake, said, "Why, partner, you look as if your very life depended on how I play this."

Mrs. Wake gave herself a little shake—or was it an involuntary start? "I wasn't thinking—I mean, I'm sorry."

Miss Eva put back one card and drew out another. Mrs. Wake was certainly taking this game seriously. She was not at all like herself today. Could it be she was missing Henry, was truly bereaved? Miss Eva took the trick and laid her cards down. "The rest are ours."

That finished the rubber and she rose to go for the tea tray. Mrs. Hildon nibbled at the last mint while Mrs. Starling began adding the afternoon's score. Mrs. Wake rose, drawing her coat close around her. "Miss Eva," she called, stopping her in the doorway, "if you'll excuse me, I seem to have got a fearful headache all of a sudden. No, I'll pick up my fur myself, don't bother," and she was gone before more than a murmur of sympathy could rise from the other three. .

"Never knew her to get a headache before," Mrs. Starling muttered on the closing of the door.

Miss Eva went on to the kitchen. Mrs. Wake had really had a stricken look on her face. Of those who mourned Brother Henry it might well be that she missed him most of all. Perhaps they had rather underestimated Mrs. Wake and her sincerity of feeling. Just because she came right out and expressed her emotions in a way no New Englander would dream of doing, did not necessarily mean that she was shallow or false. This was a new idea to Miss Eva, and as she poured boiling water into the teapot and took up the tray, she felt a little pleased with herself for having had a new idea. Perhaps there was some hope for her after all.

4

AFTER a death, clean house—that was the custom, that was the rule, and Miss Eva followed it now as she had at other such periods in her life. This time, however, she wondered about it, questioned it. Was all this cleaning due to an unconscious desire to be rid of painful reminders, to throw out every trace? Or did one just need to be convinced that this person who was dear, or who was only a habit or a burden over the years, was really gone, not hiding in the closet or tucked between spare blankets or lost in the attic among old trunks or in a cobwebbed corner of the cellar? More likely, she decided, this fury of house-cleaning came out of a feeling about death itself. Sweep it out, suck it up in the vacuum cleaner, scrub it off, paint it over, wax well the floor where death has walked.

For two weeks with the help of Clara, her regular cleaning woman, and an extra brought in for that period, Miss Eva had been hard at work on the house. Curtains were washed and rehung, silver was polished, draperies and rugs went to the cleaners and were put back in place, papers and magazines were tied up for the Boy Scout collection. All day, except for her afternoon sun bath or a brief rest on the couch in her room, Miss Eva worked alongside her helpers and at night fell

exhausted into deep sleep. She actually lost ten pounds, from exercise and doing without sweets. These two Sundays she went to church—something she had got out of the way of doing during Mama's long illness; she read the *Herald* from front to back and gave herself no moment for thinking. It was a little period apart, a parenthesis in her life.

She had left Brother Henry's room for the last, though curtains and rugs had gone out with the rest. "I'll clear out in here while you work on the bathroom," she told her helpers. It was something she dreaded, but it had to be done, no use putting it off any longer. Now was the time to pack Henry's clothes away, put them in the servants' quarters in the downstairs ell to be picked up for the Unitarian used-clothing sale later in the year. But first, his desk. With a sigh, she opened it and sat down, pulling the trash basket handy to receive the debris of five years of living.

Nothing. Not a letter, not a bill, not a single intimate line, not even a business paper. Only some unused stationery, a book of stamps, a calendar and a science-fiction book, open, face down. Miss Eva put her elbows on the bare desk and leaned her head on her hands. Henry, without fuss or bother, without dramatics or demand for sympathy, had lived these years in the very shadow. And he had not wanted to leave her anything to do for him. "You have been used enough," he had said.

After a while she rose and went to his chest of drawers, his bureau. They were well filled, for he had never stinted himself on clothes; he had had the best of everything. All his things were here, but utterly impersonal, withdrawn, in their perfect order—tidy piles of underwear, shirts, socks, pyjamas, linen handkerchiefs. And in the two closets, neat rows of shoes, suit after suit, spring and winter overcoats, tweed jackets, raincoats, suitcases and hatboxes on the shelves—all arranged as if he had planned to make their final disposal as unemotional a business as packing for a stranger who, leaving unexpectedly, might have asked the hotel management to send his clothes after him.

No, Miss Eva said, I can't do it, not today. Leave them. Next summer perhaps. She called Clara to spray against

possible moths. She would let the two women go early and spend her evening reading this book of Henry's. She would see what had occupied his mind the last night of his life.

It was not till the next morning that Miss Eva really came face to face with emptiness. There was nothing to do now, no one to do for. Never again would she have to spring out of bed, run downstairs, start the coffee, come back, get dressed and hurry to have Henry's or Papa's or Mama's tray ready on time. What was she going to do? she asked herself, lying abed, staring up at the ceiling. She was free, yes, but was freedom to be more pointless and stupid than bondage? One needed preparation for freedom, and she had had none. One needed courage to be one's self, to stand alone, unafraid of life, unafraid of seeking it out. She felt small and powerless, lost in its immensity.

What did she want, really? What was there left in life for her? Thought and contemplation? She had had time enough for that. Responsibility? She had had years of it, in a small way. What else was there? Action, adventure, danger, high emotion. Ridiculous! But those were the things she had missed, and the sad part of it was that she had passed the proper, the suitable time and yet had not lost her longing for them. "It's hopeless. It's a complete impasse," she said aloud. The sound of her voice was strange and echoing as if the emptiness of the rest of the house had spread even here to her own familiar room. But action was half of happiness, she had read somewhere, and idleness the parent of adultery. With that, she threw back the covers and got up.

It was possible to spend hours just piddling around, Miss Eva found, getting breakfast, washing up after it, straightening a picture, shifting a vase back to the exact position where it belonged, plumping up a pillow, dusting where there was no dust. A house was a time-consumer, an eater-up of life, she thought, hearing the clock strike as she came back through the hall, looking for some other small job to do. But maybe the postman had come. She got her old grey coat from the closet under the stairs, and, not bothering with galoshes though the ground was frozen and slippery, went out the front door and down to the letter box. Nothing but bills, regular

first-of-the-month business, appeals for money from various organizations, advertisements.

Coming back she paused in the pathway and looked at the day. It was as grey and drab as she felt, though the air was sharp. The tide was half in, eating at the fingers of sodden marsh along the edge of the bay, yet still low enough so she could take a walk alongshore if she liked. But to what good? She had walked enough. Suddenly she remembered the car standing idle in the garage. Why not? She could just try, and if she went slowly she could do no harm, going round and round the drive. She was sure everything would come to her when she got behind the wheel.

A few minutes later with a mounting sense of adventure she was swinging up the automatic door of the old barn that now served as garage. She had a few jittery moments just sitting there behind the wheel looking at the dash. She had never been very good at mechanical things. Even a nail was always trying to go the other way from where she wanted to hammer it. And there had been the washing machine that time down cellar right after the war began and Papa's two nurses wouldn't lift a hand outside the sick-room, Otto and his wife gone to the munition plant and nobody to take their place. She had gone down cellar to do the wash for the first time in her life, and as soon as she got the machine going, it began to shake and dance, to waltz across the floor. It seemed to be chasing her no matter which way she turned. Mrs. Starling, out trimming her hedge, had cried, "What on earth's the matter?" when she came bursting out the cellar bulkhead. "I've been attacked by a washing machine," Miss Eva cried, to which Mrs. Starling replied in her dry way, "Humph. I thought it was at least a tramp."

But there was no sense in remembering her mechanical inadequacies. After all, she had once stopped a leak under the kitchen sink by wrapping the pipe with a piece of adhesive tape. She put in the key, turned it, stepped on the starter. The car gave a shivering jerk. Oh, the clutch! Starting, stopping, stalling, eventually she backed out, headed the car into the drive that circled the hornbeam tree. Really, quite simple after all, and what a feeling of power it gave her! The

machine was not one's master, it was an extension of one's self, a magnification which made anything possible. Perhaps she would drive to California, when she had had a little more practice.

Round and round she went—lucky the circle was large enough to keep her from getting dizzy—then, gaining confidence, she drove carefully between the gateposts, down the lane past Mrs. Starling's grey-shingled house, to the turn-around at the edge of the marsh. If she could only dare to read the speedometer! She took a quick glance. What, only fifteen miles an hour? The thing must be out of order. But now to make the turn and get in again between the posts. Good, she had missed one and only slightly grazed the other.

It was then, full of pride, that she saw a car parked in the drive, smack in front of her. Her foot could not find the brake and she had no time to look for it. With a quick twist of the wheel, she turned sharply, ran across the frozen grass—never mind the rhododendrons—and hit the hornbeam tree head on. The steering wheel came up—for it did not seem that she herself had moved—struck her forehead in a splinter of light and darkness.

The next thing she knew, a man's voice was saying, "Miss Iveson, are you all right? I say, Miss Iveson!"

And Mrs. Starling: "Get out of my way, if you please. All she needs is a whiff of smelling salts."

Then the strong pungent smell and everything coming clearer. "Did I hurt it?" Miss Eva asked shakily.

"Broke a light and bashed the fender."

"No, no, not the car, the tree."

"Thinks more of that tree than of her own skull," Mrs. Starling grumbled. "No, Miss Eva, the tree still stands. What about you?"

"Me? I'm all right." She pushed a stray lock from her eyes. "Oh, Mr. Whitman. I'm so sorry. I forgot you were coming today. Mrs. Starling, this is Mr. Whitman, about Henry's will. I'll be fine in a minute." She fumbled at the door, let him help her out.

"Are you sure you are all right? I could come back——"

"Certainly she is." Mrs. Starling corked her bottle. "It takes

more than a small jolt to kill a woman or there wouldn't be many of us left by this time." And with that she hustled off toward her own side door, pulling her brown shawl tight around her shoulders against the cold.

In the sitting-room, Mr. Whitman, chubby, rosy-cheeked and cheerful with that deferential good humour, that soothing, just-leave-it-all-to-me manner that investment counsellors wear for the benefit of the old ladies whose business they attend to, spread out papers on the card table and talked and talked. Miss Eva listened with only half her mind. She had found out long ago that when she could not understand the details of anything, and didn't much want to, the best thing was to take it all with floating attention, to let herself drift on the flow of words. In fact it was easier to grasp the salient points that way. Somehow, out of the wash and swash she could discover in a general way what it was all about. So now, listening to Mr. Whitman's involved technical remarks on the state of the market, the fluctuations of stocks, the shifts in her investments, she gathered that all was going very well indeed and she had nothing to worry about. Beyond that she had no interest, but since Mr. Whitman felt it his duty to explain, by all means let him.

"Now about your brother's will, of which, as you know, our bank is executor," he began at last.

"Yes." Miss Eva sat upright now in the little straight chair, hands folded in her lap, not expecting anything of interest, but steeled to this last effort on poor Henry's behalf.

"The bulk of his estate, as you are doubtless aware," said Mr. Whitman, using that condolatory tone which he must have employed innumerable times in explaining such things to surviving relatives, "has been left to his two daughters. Too bad they were unable to come on for the funeral."

Miss Eva nodded. "I telephoned Anna who is about to go to the hospital—her third—and Jean is on the ocean bound for South Africa."

"Ah, yes. Well, he has remembered his wife, his former wife, I should say."

Again Miss Eva nodded. That was right. She let the figures slide through her mind without leaving much impression.

"And a similar amount to you."

"Oh dear me! That was not at all necessary. But I am grateful for the thought."

Mr. Whitman hesitated, took off his dark-rimmed glasses and examined them with attention. "There are also three codicils, two made some five years ago, before he left Chicago no doubt." He replaced the glasses on his nose, leaned forward, peering down at the long legal sheet spread before him. "Bequests. One to Miss Fifi Cassidy of Hollywood, California, the other to Miss Dawn Delgado of Chicago."

"But who in the world—— I never heard of them."

Mr. Whitman shot her a quick glance. "Your brother was not one to shirk his obligations. These were no doubt . . . er . . . ladies who in some way favoured, befriended him."

"Yes, I suppose so. Of course I did not know his Western friends." It was his own money, to do with as he pleased. But Fifi and Dawn—they did not sound like people one would know. Unless—— She dismissed the thought. None of her business. "You said there was a third codicil?" she asked, looking out of the window, watching a few snowflakes drift across it.

"Yes." He bent over his papers again. "A similar, or rather somewhat similar bequest to a Mrs. Bella Wake of this place. Do you——"

"Mrs. Wake!" Miss Eva looked around just in time to catch the tail end of the only indiscreet expression she had ever seen on Mr. Whitman's face. It was quickly gone with a pursing of the lips, a faint lift of the brows. She stiffened, comprehension sweeping through her. Those other two, and now Mrs. Wake! But hadn't she known? Hadn't she heard Brother Henry creaking up the stairs at five o'clock in the morning? And now this—this person, Mr. Whitman, enjoying the situation, relishing the discomfiture of—of an old maid. Well, he'd get nothing out of her. "Yes, of course," she said evenly. "Is that all?"

Mr. Whitman adjusted his glasses, his eyes still on the paper before him. "Yes, I believe so. Save for a rather curious little suggestion in connection with this bequest—which is not in cash, by the way, but in the form of certain securities."

"Yes?"

"I do give and bequeath'—let's see. Ah, here it is: ' . . . the aforementioned securities, with the suggestion that the income therefrom be used at the race track rather than at gin rummy.'" He cleared his throat. "A sly sense of humour, your brother had, Miss Iveson. Now, as soon as the estate is settled, since you have no immediate need of the money—am I right?"

"The money he left me? No, there is nothing, no need."

"Then I will write you in due course about the investments. At the moment it would seem advisable to purchase perhaps eighty shares of . . ."

Miss Eva murmured "yes," at the proper moment, and "whatever you think best, Mr. Whitman." But inwardly she was boiling with indignation. What did he think? What right had he to think anything—about her or about Brother Henry?

"That is the list of investments I would advise at the moment," Mr. Whitman was concluding. "If there are any changes I will let you know. Now I have a number of papers ready for your signature, if you will, please."

"Yes, of course." Her hand shook a little but she forced it to steadiness as she wrote and rewrote her name on the spaces marked with a small pencilled cross. There, at last she was done. She wanted nothing so much as to get him out of the house.

But apparently he had no intention of leaving yet, for after he had repacked his briefcase, he leaned back in his chair and regarded Miss Eva with an expression of benign authority. "There is another small matter I would like to take the liberty of bringing up at this time."

"Yes?" Miss Eva waited. Surely he had already brought up enough, but she would see, she would listen.

"I . . . er . . . have had it in mind ever since your brother's passing, and your little accident this morning brings it immediately to the forefront. I'd like you to consider the advisability of having someone here to drive for you, or to teach you to drive, if you must do it for yourself, someone to be here with you."

Miss Eva rubbed her forehead where a large lump had already formed. "It was a bit reckless of me to go out this morning. And of course I must get a licence." She hoped he was not leading up to the idea of a companion.

"This is a rather personal matter, Miss Iveson, and I just throw out the suggestion for you to accept or disregard as you see fit." He took out a package of cigarettes, put them back in his pocket.

It was the first time Miss Eva had ever seen him at a loss. "Do smoke. I don't mind. And I shall be interested to hear your ideas for me—whether I take them or not."

"You should have someone in the house with you, or at least coming in every day." He lighted his cigarette and continued, "Now it just happens that my first wife's nephew has turned up here in Boston—not really my responsibility of course, but I would like to do what I can for him. He is just back fairly recently from service abroad—Germany, I believe—and he has some minor disability. Nothing organic, you understand, just temporary, making it impossible for him to use his eyes for close work. Now it has occurred to me that if you would be willing to have him come down, he could serve you in many small ways—the storm windows, for instance, small jobs, the rugs and all that. He is very handy about the house, he tells me, and of course he could drive for you—or teach you."

This was a new idea and Miss Eva considered it for a moment. "A young man, I suppose?"

"In the mid-twenties, perhaps. He's been in various branches of the service for the last few years, spent some time in a college out in Indiana and gave it up to re-enlist. A bit of a drifter, I'm afraid, but a pleasant sort of chap. He might be useful to you for the rest of the winter and spring. Later I might be able to do something for him—a course in accounting, maybe. My wife is quite charmed with him—he's staying with us right now. And you would be doing a real kindness in giving him work while he is getting back into shape. It might settle him down a bit. An older woman's influence——" He paused expectantly.

Miss Eva nodded, interested now. "I do so little for anybody—— Oh, I have my charities, as you know. But person-

ally, nothing—besides making scalloped clams for church suppers. We might get along. Has he a pleasant disposition?"

"Most agreeable. If anything he has too much charm—a real handicap, I am convinced, for it is so easy to rely too heavily on it. Not that it would be anything against him, here with you."

Miss Eva puzzled over that for a moment. Mr. Whitman was being a bit vague. Though maybe he just disapproved of anyone's having a quality in which he himself was so evidently lacking. "Tell me something of his background."

"You are quite right to inquire, Miss Iveson. I know only that his mother died when he was quite young, the father was no good, disappearing early from the scene, I believe, after sending the boy to be brought up by the paternal grandfather. In Indiana, I believe that was. Or was it——"

"Sad for the child," Miss Eva murmured.

"Oh, no ill effects, I believe, beyond a certain casualness in his attitude. So many young people have that nowadays. But for such a position as this with you, I think he would fit in admirably. You might be a really good influence in his life."

Miss Eva smiled. She did not feel she had much to offer in that way. But it would be a new interest. "I have had very little experience with the younger generation. But you might send him down and let me talk it over with him."

"Excellent, Miss Iveson, excellent. Then you can form your own judgment of him and if you see your way clear——" He rose, carried his cigarette stub to the fireplace, took up his briefcase.

"I've no idea what I should pay him, in case I do——"

"Oh, a merely nominal sum. His living expenses alone will be a great help till he gets over this liver trouble, jaundice or whatever it is so many of the boys seem to have come home with. Just a matter of time, I believe. Now if you will give me some idea of where I find this Mrs. . . . er . . . Wake, Mrs. Bella Wake——" he continued, making his way across the room, no longer looking at her.

"Certainly." She rose and moved with him toward the door. "You will have no difficulty. Her house is here on the left, right next door."

Mr. Whitman hoped once more that she would find the young man of use. He bowed himself out and went bobbing down the steps, briefcase swinging beside him and an undoubted eagerness in the glance he turned toward Mrs. Wake's house as he climbed into his car.

Miss Eva closed the door and leaned against it. Mrs. Wake! For the moment she had almost forgotten her. Oh, it wasn't that she begrudged her the money or objected in any way to Henry's leaving it to her, or was shocked really at what had led to it. It was Mr. Whitman, that model of propriety with such benign concern for his clients, snickering to himself, making something low and common out of—out of anything an Iveson did! Enjoying the start he thought he was giving her, the old maid sister, no doubt saying to himself, "Shocked the hell out of her. But high time she was learning the facts of life—at least by hearsay; she'll never have a chance to take them straight."

Miss Eva gave herself a shake and went to the kitchen to get a cup of bouillon for her lunch. Her head was aching, either from the blow or out of pure imagination. She would try to forget the whole affair. Only it was going to be awkward, meeting Mrs. Wake, having her know that she knew. If the woman would only hold her tongue, ignore it, never give her a speculative glance while the cards were being shuffled, if she'd just be silent and reserved about it, in time the awkwardness might pass.

But Mrs. Wake did not keep silent. That very evening after dinner when Miss Eva was in the sitting-room reading for a bit before going up to bed, there came a knock at the door, the front door. She put on the outside light and peeked through the one clear diamond in the stained glass. She drew a deep breath, gathered her forces, pushed back the lock and opened the door. "How nice of you to drop by, Mrs. Wake! Do come in!" That was the right note to strike—light, easy, but formal. "I do hope that headache that hit you in the midst of the game the other day didn't last too long."

Mrs. Wake walked with quick short steps into the sitting-room, a stocky little figure with her green coat held tight

around her, her hair more dishevelled than usual. "I didn't come to talk about my headache."

"Oh?" Miss Eva looked at her sharply now, saw her eyes were red and swollen, that she was shivering. "You're cold. I'll build up the fire." Then when they were both seated and the blaze was flaring brightly, knowing now that she was in for it, she said quietly, "You've come to talk about my brother and his will."

Mrs. Wake flung about in her chair and faced Miss Eva with defiance in every muscle. "I reckon you begrudge it. Well, I never asked it of him. I never asked anything of him."

Miss Eva studied her for a long moment. She had shed all her pretences. "You're welcome to the money as far as I am concerned. And I am sure you gave a great deal to him. Gaiety, companionship——" She remembered the laughter on summer evenings, the eagerness with which Brother Henry would look at his watch after dinner and say, "I'll just step over for a hand or two of gin rummy with Mrs. Wake."

Miss Eva's quiet words seemed to dissolve Mrs. Wake's fierce defensiveness. She turned away, sat for a while staring into the fire. "I didn't know you'd take it like this. I thought you . . . well, you always seemed so stiff and proper and money-saving and . . . and all. And I thought when you knew he'd left something to me, you'd be telling everybody I was . . . awful . . . be ordering me to get out or something." She gave Miss Eva a quick glance. "This is such a . . . a strait-laced sort of place."

"No," Miss Eva said, her eyes on the fire. "It isn't like that, not with me, at least. I am glad you could give my brother some help these last few years. He needed it, and I—I didn't realize, didn't understand."

Mrs. Wake caught her breath in a sound that was like a sob. "He did, he did need me. Oh, he wouldn't let on, to you, to anybody, he was too New England for that. But with me—I broke him down, his reserve and all that, and it did him good." She was silent a moment, then she asked hesitantly, almost timidly, "You mean you'll still be willing to have me . . . at bridge . . . have me . . ."

"You're no different now from what you were before. Why shouldn't you keep on just the same?"

Mrs. Wake leaned back in her chair. "You don't know what it means to me, being here, having everybody at least sort of accept me. It's my life now—and I treasure it." Then she sat up straight and turned on Miss Eva fiercely. "And I'm not just an old bitch, I'm not! Oh, I don't deny I had a lot of—spirit in my time, married twice too. But any others, like Henry, they were lonely, lost, they needed me. I could give them what they'd never found, or what they had lost—confidence, warmth. Oh, I know you can't understand things like that, the way you've lived, your ideas and all——" She turned from Miss Eva with a little helpless gesture.

"I can understand warmth and generosity," Miss Eva said, "though I've had little of either—and have given less."

There was silence then in the room, only the crackle of the fire. "Your brother said something about you once," Mrs. Wake began.

"What?"

"He said you had never had a chance. It struck me funny then—seemed to me you'd had everything, everything I'd missed. All this"—her glance went round the room—"and family and education and travel and money." Then as Miss Eva made no response, she added, "I reckon you think I'm crazy, coming here like this, talking like this——"

Miss Eva shook her head. "No, I don't think that. I think you had courage to come. I like you better for it."

Mrs. Wake drew a long breath. "You aren't so different after all, you and him. A grand man if there ever was one. It meant a lot to me, knowing him, feeling he needed me. When I thought I was past ever being wanted . . . for anything . . . We had fun."

"That's why he could say what he did in his will, about the race track and gin rummy, giving you something to smile over." And for me, Miss Eva thought, for me he had only money to give. How small that was, by comparison!

Mrs. Wake gave a little laugh that was almost a sob. "He knew my weakness. I always lost at gin rummy. But I do love to bet." After a moment she went on: "You don't know

how much he meant to me, in so many ways besides . . . what you might think. You see, I grew up down south. We never had anything: Paw didn't have much education, couldn't make a dime to save his soul or keep it a minute if he did. But Paw had manners. He was a gentleman." She flung about and gave Miss Eva a defiant glare as if daring her to deny it. "I reckon you couldn't ever understand such a thing as that up here where people have money and . . . and all."

"Yes," Miss Eva said, "yes, I can. And it isn't just a matter of money up here, though many of us have had money, for a long time, and advantages." She was silent, uncomfortable, uncertain. Perhaps they had rather got into the way of expecting a gentleman to have money, but surely no one thought money made a gentleman.

Mrs. Wake had slumped back in her chair, eyes on the fire. "Maw died when I wasn't more than knee-high to a grasshopper and Sis raised us. All but me. I got fed up—she was strict as all get out. So I ran away my last year in high school. Oh, I didn't go to any finishing school or anything like I've put on. I just picked up what I could. My first husband was common as the side of a barn but he was educated. Oh, I've had some tough times! People—good and bad—I've known all kinds. But all the time, all my life I—I reckon I've been homesick for a gentleman. That's why Henry— Seemed like I'd lived it all just to come on him at the last, somebody I could count on, somebody—" Her voice broke. She dabbed at her eyes with the knuckles of one hand.

"You know," she went on after a few minutes, "near as I can figger it out, there's three kinds of men in this world—from a woman's point of view, I mean."

"Yes?" Miss Eva encouraged her, waited expectantly.

"There's the dot-dot-dash-and-over kind. And it's the prissy-proper sort that's mostly like that. You're just a means to an end with them. They make you feel like—like nothing, like no more than a—a fixture in the bathroom."

Miss Eva let out a small gasp.

Mrs. Wake said apologetically, "I reckon I oughtn't to run on like this. But as you get older, you get to thinking."

Miss Eva swallowed. "Yes, that's true. You do get to thinking." That was what she had been doing lately. Maybe every woman did, each according to what her life had been.

"Well, anyway, there's another kind of man, all desperate and passionate, I reckon you'd call it, dead serious and tense as all get out. There was this Cuban I knew—" She was silent for a little, then went on: "Lord, I used to read some of those old stories—you know, like Romeo and Juliet and Tristram and Isolde, or whatever her name was, and I'd think, well, they really had it. But you notice one thing about all of them? They all died off young, for one reason or another."

"Yes, that's true," Miss Eva said again, feeling a bit easier now they were on more classic ground, listening with more respect than she usually gave to Mrs. Wake's remarks. She wasn't scatterbrained about everything. There were some things to which she had given a good deal of thought.

"You know the reason they had to die or get killed off?"

"N-no."

"They couldn't keep it up. That sort of thing just don't stand up in real life. It wears you out. Too intense. So in a story it's got to end in tragedy. In real life it just peters out."

"Maybe so," Miss Eva agreed a bit blankly.

"Then there's another kind of man." Mrs. Wake drew a long sigh, leaned back in her chair, eyes on the fire. "He's a rare one. Maybe it's got to be an older man to have the sense to be like that. He thinks about somebody besides just himself, he's looking out for you, too. And he's easy and silly in a nice kind of way. A gentleman—that's what I call him. He's gay and tender. He's fun. I declare, I do like a bit of fun along with my lovin'." She was silent now, a small reminiscent smile about her lips. She sighed again and seemed to come back to the present. "It wasn't any old headache that sent me home the other day. That wasn't where the ache was. You don't know—"

"But maybe I do—now," Miss Eva said slowly. And after a little she added, "Even if you did have a hard time for so many years, at least you were . . . living, knowing people, finding out . . ." While she, Eva Iveson, had just been running round and round in one small circle. Such a small circle.

With an effort she brought her thoughts back to Mrs. Wake. "I am glad you were here when Henry needed you. You meant a great deal to him, made it possible for him to live through these last years. I never understood, I just didn't know. My experience has been too limited." She was silent while a log burned through, fell apart, sending the sparks flying up the chimney.

"Except for him, it's been kind of tough, living here," Mrs. Wake broke out abruptly. "People are so different, so . . . standoffish. I never know how they're going to take me. Seems like I'm always saying the wrong thing. Seems as if people are kind of suspicious of me. Though heaven knows I've tried. I've been all prunes and prisms and done my best to talk like folks around here." She gave Miss Eva an inquiring glance.

Miss Eva turned to her earnestly. "You've been frank with me and I'm going to be the same with you. I know we've acted stiff with you, maybe even suspicious. We don't mean to be like that, only—well, maybe it's because all along we have sensed just this that you have been telling me: we've felt something that didn't ring true. We've felt you were not quite being yourself. Now tonight you have been yourself, haven't you?"

"Sure have." Mrs. Wake laughed ruefully. "And probably ruined everything that I——"

"No, no, not at all. Honestly, I've liked you as I never was able to before. Forgive me, but that's the truth."

Mrs. Wake stared at her. "You reckon? Humph, that gets me, for a fact. You mean if I'd just moved in here and been natural and let myself go, people would have taken it better?"

"That's just what I mean. Because you are really warm and kind and generous. I know now—now I've seen you as you are. Anybody would feel the same way."

"Then I've really been the standoffish one, putting on all that high-toned business. Lord, that's funny! That's really funny." She looked around the room as if seeing it with new eyes, and her puzzled glance came back to Miss Eva. "It would sure be a relief if I could bring myself to just act natural. I never pretended with Henry, and he liked me all right." She stood abruptly. "I feel better. I feel worlds

better, but I reckon I better beat it before I bust down and bawl."

When she had closed the door on Mrs. Wake and come back to sit alone by the fire, Miss Eva felt more pinched and dried-up and deprived than ever before.

5

COMING down the stairs the next morning, Miss Eva stopped short on the next-to-bottom step, every muscle suddenly tense, ears strained. Someone was in the house, in the kitchen. There was no doubt of it. She must have forgotten to lock the back door last night and it would serve her right if someone were making off with the family silver. It could not be the vegetable man or the fishman—this wasn't their day and Clara would not come again till next week. It was someone who had no business there. She drew herself up, taut and rigid. There was no one to call on for help, no one who would hear her scream. The police? Her eyes went to the telephone on the small stand at the back of the hall. Help, help, a burglar? Have them come and find it a mouse, the wind, nothing. And as they left have them laugh, saying, "Just another nervous lone woman." She shook her head. Not me, she thought. Then her eye caught the shine of polished brass beside the hall fireplace which Papa had insisted on having there because he liked to open the front door on instant and visible warmth. Alas, Papa was not here! However, there was the poker. The poker would have to do.

Silently she moved through hall and dining-room, cautiously she crossed to the butler's pantry. No one was there, and now all was still in the kitchen. She moved slowly to the other swinging door and, one hand gripping the poker, pushed it open a small crack. Yes, someone was there—a man in a heavy turtle-necked tan jersey and unpressed khaki trousers. He was standing, his back to her, looking, just looking at the stove, the new electric stove she had had put in last spring. Then he moved on silent sneakers, bent, and was apparently

examining the electric coffeepot which she always left ready the night before so that a flip of the switch was all that was necessary to start it mornings. He put out one hand, lifted the lid and looked in. Then he clicked the button on, cocking his head to listen as it crackled a bit, warming. What an extraordinary tramp, if tramp he were! He was tall, loosely built—or perhaps it was the sloppy, untidy look of his clothes that made him seem so.

“Mm-m, not a bad little arrangement,” he said and, turning, faced Miss Eva. “Good morning, ma’am.”

“G-good morning.” Miss Eva waited, poker in hand, staring in utter bewilderment at the extraordinarily handsome young man who stood there in the morning sunshine, all brown and gold, with the look of a dishevelled young god who had been carelessly dumped into her prosaic red-and-white kitchen.

He looked at the poker, blinking dark eyes that seemed all the darker by contrast with his tawny hair. “Go right ahead and brain me with it, ma’am. I know I had no business walking in like this. But I knocked and nobody came and the door was unlocked and the wind was cold. “So I——” He made a little helpless gesture, and stood awkwardly waiting, contrite and yet somehow with a look of inward amusement.

Miss Eva let her breath out in a long sigh of relief. She leaned the poker against the wall. “You must be Mr. Whitman’s relative, nephew . . . connection.”

He made a little bow, rather stiff, almost foreign. “By marriage once removed and not removed far enough to suit him. Think I would suit you? It looks mighty pleasant to me here, the house, everything . . .” He ended on a note of uncertainty which was singularly engaging.

“Why, I don’t know. We can try it out, as I told Mr. Whitman.”

With a swift change of manner, he drew himself up, faced her with military erectness. “Well, first of all, if you please, let’s get one thing straight. I dropped in on the cousins Whitman, not asking any favours but just out of family feeling, and stayed on for a bit because she was so cordial and kindly. But I’ve been looking out for myself since I was twelve and I can keep right on.”

"Yes? And so——"

"So I don't want you taking me on as a kindness to Mr. Whitman just because he doesn't quite know what to do with me and feels he ought to do something. Just take me straight, on my own account or not at all. Look me over and make up your mind." He flexed one arm. "Muscle." He tapped his forehead. "Brains enough." He folded his arms, leaned back against the counter and smiled, showing white even teeth and a come-and-go dimple in his chin.

It was the smile as much as his words that conquered her. There was something boyish and appealing about it. "I like independence," Miss Eva said. "And I really need someone. Let's forget Mr. Whitman and start out fresh and new for ourselves." She put out her hand. "Shall we shake on it?"

He crossed the kitchen, light and quick on his feet, with a little bounce to each step—Mercury, messenger of the gods, shod with wings, Miss Eva thought. He took her hand in his, bowed over it, again with a suggestion of something foreign in his manner. Or was it just an old-fashioned formal courtesy such as one did not meet with often nowadays in the young? "You're here early, and I like that, too. Have you had your breakfast?"

"No, ma'am. I left too soon in the morning for that, hitched a ride down on a wrecker."

"A wreckér?"

"From a garage over in Kingston. A very kind man came out of his way to drop me at the head of the lane, even offered to buy me a cup of coffee. But I——" His eyes went to the coffeepot that was bubbling heartily now.

Of course the garage man went out of his way. Who wouldn't, to oblige so friendly, so cheerful and well-mannered a young man? "The coffee will be ready in a minute, and meanwhile I'll see what I can stir up for you."

"Please, no. It is quite impossible for you to be waiting on me."

"But I always——" He pointed to the small rocker beside the table where cookbooks were neatly arranged against the wall. "You will sit there and tell me." The authority in his tone was tempered by a delightful gaiety.

Miss Eva sat. She looked up at him, amused to think that she was taking orders rather than giving them, and, meeting his gaze that was both stern and humorous, she smiled. What a thoroughly charming young man! How could Mr. Whitman have implied that something had been left out of his make-up? What's more, she thought, as she told him where to find pots and pans, he looked the picture of health. There was no visible evidence of whatever physical disability he had. She watched him slice half a loaf of bread for toasting, peel off a dozen slices of bacon and take six eggs from the carton in the refrigerator. He must be starving—not that she begrudged him any of it. On the contrary it might be rather nice to have someone around who had a hearty appetite. Not since Papa's day had such an ample breakfast been cooked in this kitchen. In fact the very kitchen itself looked different, his presence lending it a kind of golden glow which reached out to her, sitting there in the little rocking chair, and gave her a sense of youth and vitality. Usually with the young, Miss Eva felt all the more staid and settled, even a little awkward over the gap in years and in point of view. Here was something altogether different. Why, Miss Eva thought, this young man might turn out to be a sort of bridge between past and present. He might be a real experience, broadening, educational. "How did you ever learn so much about cooking?" she asked.

He dropped the egg beater into the sink, then with a flip of the skillet, tossed the eggs up so they turned over in mid-air, caught them in the skillet again, reduced the heat and only then turned to face her. "Please, ma'am, don't you know? You must never speak to a chef when he is in the midst of some delicate culinary task."

"All right, all right," Miss Eva chuckled. "I only hope the eggs are as good as they looked in that flying glimpse I had of them."

"We'll soon see. Now the dishes, where are they?"

"You might at least let me get my own tray and——" She started to rise but a gesture from him stopped her.

"Not while you've got Joe around. Now where——"

"In the cabinet over the counter. So your name is Joe. Mr. Whitman neglected to tell me."

"Joe it is, ma'am, at your service." He flung open the cabinet doors and, with what could be described only as a swoop, brought down cups and saucers and plates and set them on the table over by the window.

Miss Eva started to speak and was silent. She had not planned to sit at the table with him. She had carried her tray to the sitting-room for so many years that she had slipped back easily into the habit again these last weeks, with Henry no longer here to sit in the dining-room with her. A tray was less lonely than a large table with empty places, and she had never made a practice of eating in the kitchen. It did not seem fitting, somehow, though Mrs. Starling said, "The closer to the stove, the sooner over and done with. Eating is a necessary evil." Miss Eva leaned back again in her chair. Of course she would sit here with Joe. The kitchen was sunny and cheerful, and besides, hadn't she been wanting to break away from some of those little habits which had held her enslaved for so long?

"Here you are, ma'am." Joe, standing behind her chair, made a small bow and waited to seat her.

She said, "Thank you," sat down and, when he had taken his place across from her, exclaimed, "How good this looks! Mr. Whitman didn't tell me you could cook."

"I've done quite a lot of things in my young life that Mr. Whitman knows nothing about. Kind of a Jack-of-all-trades, I'm afraid."

There was a trace of bitterness in the words oddly at variance with Miss Eva's first impression of him. She gave him a sharp glance over her coffee cup and caught the fleeting look of resentment, of discontent that passed across his face, giving him for a moment a wholly different aspect, no longer confident and spirited. He was not so simple a person as she had thought. And yet there was something appealing about that little hint of dissatisfaction with himself and she was moved to reassure him. "It's a good thing to be a Jack-of-all-trades. Too many men settle down so early into one narrow groove, never knowing anything beyond their own little limited line."

He gave her a keen look from under lowered lids. "You've

got to have a line in this world. Trouble with me is, I——” He was silent.

“Well, what do you expect? To have it all ready-made for you when you come into this world? You have to explore, try this and that. And you have time. You have youth, all life ahead of you, rich and full. Oh, if you could only realize——” Miss Eva caught herself up. She had not meant to speak with such vehemence. But if someone had only spoken so to her, in time, made her listen, would she have listened? Was Joe listening now?

He said nothing. He was only regarding her thoughtfully, a bit of toast arrested, halfway to his mouth.

Miss Eva had the feeling that he was considering her words not so much in relation to himself as for what they revealed about her. And he was looking at her not as if she were just a part of the scenery, or a piece of furniture, the way young people usually looked at their elders, but as if he were studying another human being who might have feelings too, hopes and despairs. She stiffened involuntarily against his curiosity. Yet there was more than that in his grave, kind eyes; there was warmth and a desire to understand. She leaned forward impulsively. “It’s just that life is something rare and wonderful and you must realize it as you go along. Don’t let time get ahead of you. Time is the great betrayer. You must treasure each moment, wring everything from it, even if what you are doing seems aimless and not—not according to Mr. Whitman’s ideas of what a young man should do. It may be that the sidetrack is really the main road, leading to the place you’re looking for. Oh, you’re present and real, you have today——” Miss Eva paused for breath, gave Joe a rueful smile. “I was real once myself. Now eat your breakfast. I won’t rant and rave any more, and do forgive the sermon.”

Silently Joe returned to the business of eating, seeming to give his entire attention to it. Watching him, Miss Eva thought, I’m just a garrulous old woman. He does well to make no response, to give me no encouragement to go on. Poor boy, he’s eating as if he hasn’t had a square meal in a month. The Whitmans, childless, middle-aged people trying

to keep their weight down, probably had no conception of what a young person needed in the way of food.

Joe mopped up the last of the honey with a piece of toast. Then, leaning back in his chair, tilting it back a little, he looked across at her. "You're still real—don't ever think you are not. And you're not a bit like what I thought, from what Mr. Whitman said."

"No?" What did Mr. Whitman know of her? Only the surface, only the front with which she faced the world. "Mr. Whitman knows nothing beyond the condition of the market," she said with asperity.

Joe's eyes lighted up. "How right you are! Lord, I needn't have worried so. I can see we're going to get on fine."

It was an accolade, the way he said it. Miss Eva was enveloped in a glow of pleasure. It was as if she had a champion against all the Mr. Whitmans of this world, as if they stood together in warmth and understanding. But all she said was, "I think we'll make out."

"From what he said," Joe went on, "I thought you'd be stiff and inhuman as a stuffed owl, something straight out of the ark."

"I know." Miss Eva sighed. "People think I'm cold and reserved and . . . and conventional. They've told me so sometimes." There was Mrs. Wake, for instance, saying just that, and surprised to discover that she was different. It had taken Mrs. Wake six years and the shock of Brother Henry's death to know her. And here this young stranger had seen straight into her without delay. It seemed so wonderful to her that she was hungry to hear it said again, as hungry as he had been for his breakfast. "I don't seem like that to you?"

"I couldn't tell you what you seem like to me at this moment, ma'am—Santa Claus, a guardian angel, a rabbit's foot maybe, and a Fourth of July sparkler thrown in for good measure—one of those that sizzles and sparks when you give it a shake."

Miss Eva laughed. "I like that. To sparkle and sizzle is what I've been needing to do. Let it be one of your duties to give me a shake now and then."

"Ma'am, it'll pleasure me no end."

"You know, Joe, every now and then your speech has quite a Southern flavour. Mr. Whitman seemed to think you grew up in Indiana."

"I was born there. But my grandfather lived in Louisiana, down in the bayou country south of New Orleans, and I lived with him till he got—till I was twelve."

"That explains it then. Oh, I like it, don't think I don't! But now let's be practical for a bit. Is there anything special you like to eat, or that you have to have? Mr. Whitman said something about liver trouble."

Joe drained his coffee cup. "When doctors disagree—one says eat no fats, another says they're O.K.—you've got to follow your instincts. So that's what I do. I can always eat steak, since you're so kind as to ask, ma'am."

"Good. I'll order some. I haven't had any in a long time. My brother had high blood pressure and——" She caught herself up abruptly. Nothing was more stupid than a recital of the symptoms of some member of the family. She must watch herself. She didn't want to be like that, boring and tiresome just because she lived alone and had no one to talk to. "Yes, please," she said as Joe reached for her cup. "Just half full. I usually leave some for a cup in mid-morning."

Joe, at the counter, gave the coffeepot a doubtful shake. He put his own cup in the sink and began filling Miss Eva's. "I'm afraid there isn't too much left."

"But, please, I didn't mean for you not to have any. I'll make a fresh pot later. Do help yourself. You see I've just got in the habit of making so much and——" There it was again—habit, habit. How she hated that word! "Oh, I'm just an old woman getting more set in my ways every day, and it's got to stop. I'll be an old woman because there's no getting out of it, but I—I'll be damned if I'm going to be set. You must watch and nip it in the bud every time. That's to be another of your duties, do you hear me?"

Joe, who had been standing, coffeepot in hand, during this vehement outburst, now nodded gravely, filled his cup and came back to the table. "I'll make a note of that, ma'am."

Suddenly Miss Eva realized how she must have sounded—like a lunatic, no doubt. "I'm not crazy, truly I'm not. Just old and peculiar." She laughed ruefully.

"You may be peculiar, ma'am. I haven't known you long enough to say. But you don't seem old to me."

"You must have been living among octogenarians."

"I spent my best, my happiest years, with one."

"Oh, your grandfather."

"My grandfather," he repeated, looking back at her steadily as if defying her to say anything against him.

"I'm sure you must have been a great pleasure to him." It was probably from him that Joe had learned his manners, that little air of deference which was so lacking in the behaviour of most young people nowadays. "But now," she went on, "we must plan the day. My car, which you must have seen as you came in——"

He nodded, the tension gone from his face. "You really bashed in the front of it."

"Yes, avoiding Mr. Whitman's car. I couldn't find the brake. Of course I had no business trying to drive, not knowing any more about it than I do. You will have to teach me."

Joe studied her for a moment. "I suppose it gave you a little excitement."

Miss Eva was startled. How extraordinary that he should see, that he should understand that! "Go right ahead," she said in answer to his inquiring glance as he took a packet of cigarettes from his pocket.

"Perhaps you will join me? Right after breakfast is the time they taste best."

Somewhat to her own surprise Miss Eva took one and was at once glad she had done so. It seemed to establish a greater ease between them, relaxing, companionable. Why was it that sharing a small vice should have that effect? Would it be the same with a shared . . . virtue? At the moment she could think of none that was shareable.

"Have you always lived in this house?" Joe asked, when he had lighted her cigarette and his own.

"I was born here." The words had a strangely momentous sound; they seemed to go out into the quiet room, to beat

against the walls and fall back, heavy, heavy on her. Miss Eva all at once was conscious of herself as she must appear in Joe's eyes. The house, too, out of date, Victorian. She could feel it, and all it stood for, closing around her, dark and oppressive, empty, gloomy as a mausoleum, herself a prisoner in it. If she could only reach out like Samson grasping the pillars of the temple, and pull the whole thing down on her! But that hopeless, small moment of despair passed as she sat watching the smoke rise from the cigarette between her fingers. Perhaps she still might rise, lifted up by a power greater than herself to some high peak from which she could see before her all the strange and beautiful, the passionate and cruel world. With a wrench she brought herself back into the present reality. "The car—we were speaking of the car. Do you mean you can repair it yourself?"

"I believe so, ma'am. Enough to get it to the garage. I'm not so bad at that sort of thing. I can fix that leaky tap for you, too. The one at the sink."

"Yes. I've been meaning to call the plumber." Why hadn't she, days ago? She'd been thinking too much. Joe would be good for her; he would perhaps bring her back to sanity. She wanted to tell him so, for she was sure he would understand. But such things were hard to put into words. So all she said was "It will be most helpful, and quite a saving to me, if you are able to make such small repairs about the place."

"So I figured."

The words were innocent enough, yet they gave Miss Eva a feeling oddly at variance with what she had been thinking about Joe. Was there an element of calculation there? It was as if her native caution were saying, Wait. Go more slowly. I don't know him yet. Has he been studying me only in order to find out how to make himself seem worth more to me?

Oh, don't be so suspicious, Miss Eva told herself. It was just that when one had money—not that she had so much, only a comfortable amount—and others didn't, there was always an element of doubt, the dislike of being done, as the saying was, and a natural disinclination to be parsimonious or ungenerous.

She finished her coffee now. "By the way, we have not yet arranged what I am to pay you. We should settle that right away."

"Please don't worry about it."

Had he seen that underneath she was disturbed? Was he as keen as that in sensing another's feeling? "But I'd rather be businesslike," she persisted.

"How can you possibly know how much I'm worth till you try me out? Anything—or nothing—will be all right with me. I have to give my eyes a rest, so the doctors say. I'm sort of at loose ends right now and I'm just grateful to you for taking me in—and for being the sort of person you are." His face was as frank and open, as artless as a child's and Miss Eva was ashamed of her brief moment's suspicion. "Now suppose I clean up in here and then get to work on the car." He rose without waiting for an answer and began gathering up the dishes.

"I hadn't really planned for you to wash dishes." She hadn't planned anything, to tell the truth.

"But it is one of my specialities. I've earned many a meal that way when I had no money to pay for it."

"Have you really?" She pictured him hungry, looking in through restaurant windows, the smell of food coming out, snow falling, his threadbare coat too short in the sleeves, the collar turned up against the wind. Miss Eva gave herself a little shake. She was making a regular little match girl out of him. He had probably just marched boldly in and said, "How about giving me a meal for cleaning up in here?" "Well," said Miss Eva, crossing over to the small table by the wall and taking up memorandum pad and pencil, "I don't propose to let you go hungry while you're with me." She sat down and began her grocery list. "The soap flakes are in the cupboard at your left."

"I'll soon learn my way around." Joe turned on the hot water full tilt and shook a snowstorm of white flakes into the dishpan.

"Stop, stop, enough!" Miss Eva cried.

Joe whirled around, sending a shower of flakes across the table. "M-ma'am?"

"Wait." Miss Eva crossed quickly to the sink, waved him aside and turned off the hot water so she could make him hear. "Don't look so upset. I didn't mean to snap your head off. It's just that you don't need to use so much soap as all that. It's quite unnecessary."

"Oh." He looked down at her with a puzzled expression. "Oh," he said again, but with a difference.

Miss Eve found herself suddenly on the defensive. Had there been a trace of—of scorn in that "Oh" of his? "I just don't like waste."

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid I can't scoop it back into the box—it's gone now. But I'll remember next time."

Miss Eva went back to her grocery list. Steak, potatoes, more soap flakes, coffee . . . When she looked up the dishes were stacked neatly in the rack to drain and Joe was wringing out the dish mop, sticking it in at a jaunty angle beside the drainer. "You're quick," she said.

"When I have to do something I like to get it done. Have more time to loaf, that way. I'll just fix this tap while I'm about it. If you'll tell me where the tool chest is. No need of letting your water bill run up."

"You'll find everything you need in the shed room—out that door to your left." My water bill indeed! she thought with wholly inconsistent resentment. Doesn't he realize I could let all the faucets run day and night and still be able to pay the bill? Or is this his way of poking fun at my small economics, at my New England thrift? Doesn't he know it's that sort of thing which accounts for my having enough to live on? Or does it? Miss Eva shook her head. What she had was due to Papa's good business sense, his daring and yet wise use of what he had inherited. But surely somewhere back through the generations it all must have started by someone's saving of candle ends and such. Otherwise—but no matter, no matter. She just didn't want anybody thinking her mean and small. Wasn't she right now getting ready to order three pounds of the best steak—at over a dollar a pound? She never asked the price of something she had made up her mind to get.

Joe came back whistling under his breath, monkey-wrench.

screwdriver and the box of spare washers in his hands. "I found everything all right." He gave her a cheerful nod as he passed.

"Good." Miss Eva knew she had better be getting her order in if she was to catch the first delivery, but instead she sat there watching him as he worked at the faucet. For his own sake—no matter how Papa or anyone else made money—he ought to understand how it was about throwing things away, that it wasn't right, in a world where there was so much want. He had known want—washing dishes for a meal—and he ought to learn how to avoid it. "I said I didn't like waste, and that isn't just being mean and pinch-penny, it . . . it's a responsibility to the world. Then too, it's a kind of game with me. Don't you see? Turning off lights when I leave a room, using as much as is needed, no more, of soap or hot water or anything? I get satisfaction out of it. . . . I don't know—" She gave a little laugh. "It's rather fun, that's all."

Joe, tap in hand, had turned to face her when she began to speak and when she had finished he continued to stand there just looking at her, gravely, almost with concern. "I . . . I don't know . . ." he began doubtfully.

All at once Miss Eva saw as if with his eyes, saw herself sitting there, pencil and pad in hand, severe and proper in her grey flannel dress, the white collar fastened with Mama's oxidized silver breast-pin, plain, tidy and out of a world wholly alien to him. And beyond this visible self, she saw her life as he must see it now, revealed in all its bleakness, its desolation, by what she had just said, by the confession that she had been driven to find her fun in such meagre, small, dull doings. And with that vision of herself, made all the more drab by contrast with the youth and vigour and warmth of the man before her, she felt so sharp, so unbearable an ache spread through her that she rose to walk away.

Joe's voice stopped her at the door. "I see, yes, I see now," and there was compassion in his tone.

"Good," Miss Eva said shortly and went on to the back hall, sat down beside the telephone. But before lifting the receiver, she waited for the pounding at her temples, for the tightness in her throat to subside. What's the matter with me? she

asked herself. I am all in a state. Why? Is it just the impact of a new personality? Why should I care what he thinks of me?

Maybe, she thought after a little, maybe it came of being alone so much. Maybe it was because of going through this sort of upheaval these last few weeks. That was what had made her so easily, so foolishly affected, moved, eager for something—she didn't know what—and vulnerable too, to kindness and sympathy. She did not want to be like that. She wanted to be independent and whole, complete in herself. She had to be. With that she took up the phone, gave the number and her order in a more than usually crisp and decisive voice.

As she hung up the receiver, the grandfather clock struck, and she counted the strokes, listening to the protesting rumble from the works of the more-than-century-old timepiece. Like an admonishment, a protest out of the past. Eleven? How could that be? The clock on the stairs retorted in higher key. Yes, the whole morning had gone, over breakfast.

Joe appeared in the dining-room door. "Tap's O.K. I'll see about the car now."

"Good enough," Miss Eva said. After a moment she heard the kitchen door slam and went through to the sitting-room. She stood by the window, a little back from it so Joe would not think she was keeping tabs on him. He had opened the hood, he was poking around at the engine, hammering, the sleeves of the khaki army jacket he had flung round his shoulders flapping as he moved. He ought to have something warmer than that, Miss Eva thought. Did he have no overcoat? He didn't seem to have brought any luggage except that small duffle bag she had seen by the kitchen door. She would have to ask him about that, and arrange where he was to stay.

Joe slammed down the hood, got in behind the wheel. The engine spluttered, caught, roared, and he backed away from the tree with a swish of tyres, over the frozen grass, then down the drive between the gateposts, skidding into the lane. Then with a shrill squeal of brakes, he slowed down, thrust his head out the window and waved to her, smiling, triumphant. Miss

Eva waved back. How dear of him to think of her, to know she would be watching to see if he made it! Oh, it was nice having him here! She was going to enjoy it. Joe. Joe what? She didn't even know his last name.

6

MISS EVA was still standing there by the window in the sitting-room when a knock at the kitchen door made her start guiltily—though why she should feel guilty, she had no notion. Hurrying out, she found Mrs. Starling there, one hand holding her old brown coat tight around her, in the other a covered dish.

She thrust it toward Miss Eva with the abruptness which with her always accompanied a kind deed, as if she would at once disclaim credit and avoid the embarrassment of receiving thanks for it. "Clam chowder. I suppose you'll have to feed him."

"It smells delicious, and how good of you! Do come in. I know he will enjoy it."

"Humph. I didn't make it just for him, I assure you, though he looks like the kind that could swallow the whole of it, dish and all, in one good gulp. I hope he isn't going to eat you out of house and home, and wages besides." She untied her black scarf, waited for Miss Eva to put the chowder in the refrigerator and then followed her, for once without protesting, into the sitting-room. "They want the earth nowadays."

"Most people want all they can get." Miss Eva motioned her to a chair and sat down herself.

"Oh, you! You've got such advanced ideas."

"No, I just don't believe in grinding the faces of the poor, as it says in the Bible. The trouble is, I don't know exactly what I should pay him."

"You mean you let him start right in without arranging all that in advance?"

"Well, yes, in a way," Miss Eva admitted. "I mean, there

seemed to be so much to talk over that we just didn't get around to any definite figure."

"Honestly, Miss Eva, you're a babe in the woods when it comes to practical matters. Oh, I know you can run circles around us all in small economies—though heaven knows you don't have to—but in other ways—and this is just an example. Now he's begun and you've got used to the idea and he'll take advantage of you and charge what he pleases."

That might be true, Miss Eva admitted to herself. But no matter. It really wasn't important any more. "I suppose wages have gone up since we had Otto. I don't know what Papa paid him—fifteen or twenty dollars a week, I think."

"You'll be lucky to get off with two or three times that. I don't know what we're coming to. I count myself lucky that I'm still able-bodied and can get along alone."

"Well, it's only temporary with me," Miss Eva said, and was startled at the little pang she felt at the very notion of giving up Joe. "I am sure he can teach me to drive very quickly." She rose. "No, don't get up. I'm just going to get us a cup of coffee."

"Coffee? It's practically lunchtime."

"I'm running late this morning." And how very pleasant it was to be doing something out of regular schedule!

When she came back with the coffee tray, Mrs. Starling said, "I don't like the way he walks."

"Who? Joe? What do you mean?"

"Only that I couldn't help seeing him come up the walk this morning—as if he owned the place. And looking back when he left just now, waving. Too familiar, if you ask me."

She hadn't asked, Miss Eva thought with a wry smile as she poured the coffee. But she only said with mildness, "Well, now, I don't know. After all, I'm not hiring him to walk one way or another. And I think it was real friendly of him to look back and wave. After all, he's Mr. Whitman's cousin—connection—not a servant in the regular sense." She found herself all at once feeling violently on the defensive about Joe. Certainly it was none of Mrs. Starling's business in any case.

"Humph," Mrs. Starling grunted, stirring her coffee energetically. "You've got to make up your mind whether you're

entertaining a friend or keeping a man to work about the place."

"Why shouldn't one person be both? I see no incongruity in that."

Mrs. Starling took a sip of coffee. "Stronger than usual. I suppose he made it," she commented, set down the cup. "Really, Miss Eva, sometimes, if I didn't know better, I'd think you were a Communist, the way you talk. Not that I'm one to put on airs and keep people in their places. I'm just a plain New Englander, since 1665, and I believe in democracy. But there is such a thing as fitness. Times have changed, but certain things don't give way. Give some people an inch and they'll take an ell, and this one—Joe, did you say?—is the kind to take everything in sight. If I know beans, and I think I do."

Well, Miss Eva thought defiantly, let him. I don't care. I've had more excitement, more new interest, since early morning than I've had in the last ten years. But all she said was "You know your beans, potatoes and onions as well. But I think we'll get along very nicely together."

Mrs. Starling was silent, finishing her coffee. "It's just that you are such an innocent, Miss Eva," she went on after a moment. "It's none of my business, and you'll pardon me, I'm sure, for putting in my word of warning. But there's something about you that makes people feel they have to take care of you—maybe because you always have been taken care of. How is your head today?"

"My head?" She touched her forehead. She had forgotten all about it. "Just a small lump and that's going down."

"After the first twenty-four hours is the danger time. Dr. S. had a case once, man fell off the roof, hit his head, went right on working as usual and the next day——" She shook her head ominously. "Concussion."

"I don't think it was that much of a blow."

Mrs. Starling rose. "Well, I hope not, I'm sure. But you never know. Now mark my words, this Joe——"

"Maybe he'll feel as you do," Miss Eva smiled, rising: "that he has to look after me."

"Well, you'll always have me next door, feeble as I am, with

one foot in the grave and the other galloping on toward eternity, and in case of sudden need, just call out. I'll phone the police and come right over as fast as I can make it."

Miss Eva laughed, holding the swinging door to the pantry open and letting Mrs. Starling pass through ahead of her. "You sound as if you thought I was going to be murdered in my bed."

"I haven't the least idea what's going to happen to you, in bed or out, Miss Eva. I only know that when my instincts bristle and give me warning, I take heed, and I advise you to do the same."

"Mine don't bristle one bit. As a matter of fact I find Joe an interesting character. This is my chance to learn something about the younger generation."

"I dare say. If your taste runs that way. Mine doesn't." She paused with her hand on the doorknob. "Personally I'd like to start a Hate the Young Society. I don't doubt it would have more appeal than the S.P.C.A. I hope you started this Joe right in on the rugs. Clara told me last week they were really too much for her."

"We didn't get to the rugs. He had to go see about the car as soon as we finished breakfast."

Mrs. Starling stared at her. "It was after eleven when he left the house. I can't help seeing——"

"Of course not, Mrs. Starling. I keep an eye on your place, too. Remember the time your chimney burned out and I called the fire chief before you even had a notion what was going on?" At the moment she felt kindly toward all the world, even her old spying, prying neighbour.

"Yes, yes, but just the same, watch your step with this young man." And with that she let herself out and shut the door firmly behind her.

Well, that little visitation was over, Miss Eva thought. What next? Maybe she would make a pie for dessert tonight. She got a jar of mincemeat from the pantry and went to work with enthusiasm. It was fun cooking for someone who had an appetite.

When she had had a bowl of Mrs. Starling's chowder for her lunch, and had brought the pie, crisp and deliciously fra-

grant, from the oven, she went upstairs for her afternoon rest. It was cold today, the sky clouded over since noon, so there was no chance of a sun bath. She unfolded the crocheted afghan, kicked off her shoes, loosened her hair and lay down on the couch under the window, where the tall potted ferns kept the light from her eyes. She fell asleep almost immediately. The excitement of the morning made her sleep longer and more deeply than usual, and when she awoke she lay there with eyes closed, heavy-weighted still, and wondered if this was another day, and if so, what day? But what was that awful smell? Something burning? She turned her head and blinked.

Joe stood leaning against the side of the open door, smoking. He smiled apologetically. "Excuse me, ma'am. I just came up to make sure you wasn't dead or something."

"Weren't," Miss Eva corrected automatically.

"Weren't what?"

"Dead, not wasn't."

"Oh. I never took grammar very seriously."

"But you should. It's important."

"Is it?"

"Of course. I will teach you—if you don't mind."

"Now that's mighty kind of you."

"Why, I'd be glad to. Such things help—when you go looking for a job or something." At this point it occurred to Miss Eva that this was an odd conversation—or, rather, that it was an odd situation in which to be having it. She started to rise, remembered she was in her stocking feet and lay back again on the pillows. "I've always felt one could learn from anyone—on the bus, the train, the boat, anywhere."

Joe came across the room, reaching into his pocket for cigarettes which he held out to her. She took one. He lighted it with his flaming lighter, then sat down on the edge of her big sleigh bed, rumpling the cover, making the springs groan. "I'd better tell you about the car."

"Yes. Was it very bad?" She tucked up the pillow under her head, bringing it higher.

"The fender and headlight were nothing. I could have fixed them myself. But there was plenty else wrong."

"You mean I injured it internally?"

He shook his head. "Not by hitting that tree. More by just never taking care of the car properly, I'm afraid. It's a wonder the thing's kept going this long. Half the spark plugs are gone, the carburettor is practically a ruin, and Lord, you should have seen that oil filter!"

"Oh. Well, I just depend on the man at the garage to take care of such things. As long as it ran, my brother didn't bother himself about it one way or the other."

"That's very evident," Joe said with a suggestion of scorn. "It's a downright shame to treat a nice car like that. You ought not to allow such a thing."

Miss Eva choked on smoke, recovered herself. "I'll try not to any more. If I only knew——"

"You've got me now, luckily. But this job will take time. I've arranged it all with the garage man. Now if there's anywhere you want to go today, he'll lend us a car."

"No, no, I don't think there's anywhere I have to go."

"O.K. then." He sighed as if still depressed by the thought of all the neglect the car had had. He shook ashes on the hooked rug beside the bed. "I'm sorry," he apologized. "But they say it's good for it."

"So I've heard." In the silence that followed Miss Eva was again and more acutely conscious of the situation—a hired man, even so unusual a one as this, who walked right into her bedroom and sat down on her bed! Who ever heard of such a thing? Her lips parted—but what could she say? The moment for speaking was past.

"You must think I've got a nerve," Joe said.

That was so exactly what Miss Eva had been thinking that all she could do was stare at him.

He twisted his shoulders apologetically. "It's just that I can't stand seeing a good machine go to pieces out of pure neglect."

"Oh, that. I mean, I'm grateful to you for taking an interest." Then it came over her all at once that he was just like a big friendly overgrown puppy. He didn't even realize that he should not have come into her room like this. And really when one got right down to it, wasn't it rather pleasant

and cozy, having him sitting here, taking her to task so earnestly for having neglected the car? "Are you getting hungry? Did you have any lunch? I've no notion what time it is."

"Oh, I picked up a sandwich over in Kingston."

"In Kingston? What were you doing over there?"

"The garage—remember? I rode down with the man who runs it. A good place, too. They know their nuts and bolts."

"Oh, I should have told you. I don't know what I was thinking of. I've always gone to the place right down the street. I've an account there."

"That doesn't matter, ma'am. These people will bill you. I told them you were solvent. They took my word for it all right."

"Oh." She waited a moment getting used to the notion that Joe had vouched for her financially. That was turning things around all right. "Are you sure you had enough to eat?"

"Plenty to last me till regular dinner-time, thanks. Never eat much in the middle of the day, and soon as I came in I cleaned up that left-over chowder in the refrigerator. But I'll be ready for the steak. I see your order came. What time do we eat?"

Miss Eva put out her cigarette in the potted fern on the window shelf beside her. She hadn't really expected him to be here for three meals a day. Just something at noon was the rule for helpers by the day, those who went home nights. Only Joe—she ought to telephone around and find him a room in the neighbourhood. He wouldn't know where to go. She must be more practical about him, as Mrs. Starling said.

He rose now. "Around seven, maybe?"

"Dinner? Oh, yes. Any time you like." As soon as she had spoken she was struck by the incongruity of it—letting him decide. What had got into her, deferring to anyone like this?

He stood looking down at her. "That's a swell-looking pie you made."

"I hope it tastes good."

"It does. I checked on that." He tossed his cigarette stub in the general direction of the fireplace, looked back at her with

boyish discomfiture. "I hope you don't mind. I just couldn't resist, it smelled so wonderful."

"Of course I don't mind. I made it to be eaten."

At the door he paused. "Excuse me for saying so, but I like that effect." He made a little gesture to indicate her loosened hair. "Takes all the starch out of you, makes you look like a little girl tucked up for a nap."

Miss Eva touched a lock that lay on the pillow. "The funny thing is"—and she didn't in the least mean to say such a thing, it just came out—"that I don't feel very different, inside, from the way I did then. . . . Maybe it's abnormal, or something."

He gave her a slow smile, an understanding smile, it seemed to her. "Take it easy now. Don't get up till you feel like it. I'm going to see what's wrong with the overhead light in the kitchen."

Miss Eva lay staring up at the ceiling. Take it easy. Nobody had ever said that to her before and she found it quite delightful. In many ways he treated her with great deference—and he should, for after all he was young enough to be her son—but he spoke to her sometimes with free and easy camaraderie, as if they were of the same generation. It was rather pleasant. Like a little girl, he had said. Like little Eva. She sighed.

When she went downstairs she found him standing on a chair putting the last screw in the globe of the ceiling light. "The bulb was loose, that's all. Washed the glass too while I was about it. This the best screwdriver you've got?"

"I'm sure I don't know. There's that toolbox out in the shed. Nobody's opened it since Otto——"

"As bum a lot of tools as I ever laid eyes on, if you'll excuse my saying so."

"Well, you see, I never took much interest," Miss Eva said apologetically, "and when anything has had to be mended I've just called someone in and——"

"Just throwing money away. I'll go down to the hardware store tomorrow and see what I can do about it."

"Well, that's very kind of you. I suppose it will save in the long run." She glanced up at the clock. "Dear me, it's past teatime! I had no notion I'd napped so long."

"Try that now." Joe stepped down, looking up at the light with pride.

Miss Eva obediently turned it on and off again. "Splendid! You managed all right even with the old screwdriver."

"Yes, I managed, but it wasn't easy. You see how the thing is bent at the tip."

"I see," Miss Eva said. "I dare say it's high time I had a new one. I'm sorry about tea. Is it too late, do you think?"

"Tea?" Joe sounded as if he had never heard the word before. He turned on the faucet, washed his hands as he looked up at the little skillet clock over the stove. "I don't know a thing about teatime. I just know it's getting on toward the Hour. And I ran across plenty of the wherewithal when I was looking for the tool chest."

"The hour? The whercwithal?"

He dried his hands on the linen roller towel beside the sink. "I'll get it." And without a glance in her direction he went off, whistling, to the shed room.

He was certainly taking over, Miss Eva thought. But rather dear of him, and he was so gay and delightful about it. She smiled to herself. I don't really care, so why pretend I do, just for the look, the sound of it when there's nobody but me to see or hear? He's beginning to feel at home, that's all, and I'm glad. Poor boy, he never had a home, really!

"Good stuff, ma'am," Joe said coming back with a bottle in one hand, holding it up, patting it admiringly. "You may not know tools but you sure know liquor. This is the McCoy."

"McCoy? I'm not familiar with all the brands my brother Henry had. He'd just get out a bottle and I didn't notice when I poured his drink."

"What, none for his little sis?"

"Not whisky. Though we used to have a glass of sherry together now and then. And champagne for parties or at Christmas, maybe."

"I see. But you'll have a bit just to keep me company, won't you?"

"Indeed I will." She felt ready for anything.

"Branch water or on the rocks?"

"On the rocks," Miss Eva said with decision. That was the way Brother Henry took it.

"O.K., ma'am, and by the way, I took the liberty of starting up a fire in the library a while ago, just to give us that good cozy feeling. There's a storm blowing up. So if you'll just skip along in there, I'll be with you in one minute." He was breaking ice from the tray and it clinked with a cheerful sound as he dropped it into the glasses.

"That'll be fine," Miss Eva said. How nice it was, having someone young and gay about the house! In the library she found he had drawn up the two big chairs before a roaring fire and had placed a small mahogany table between them. She stood looking around the room. There hadn't been a fire in here since Papa's last winter. Maybe she had been missing something—that warm, cozy feeling Joe spoke of, maybe. The room, ordinarily so dark and gloomy with bookshelves running to the ceiling, with dark-brown hangings and heavy furniture, seemed to have come alive. Like me, Miss Eva thought with wonder. All because Joe was so full of life. It was contagious.

She crossed to the window. Mrs. Wake's house looked all dark beyond the cedars and the bare, dusk-dimmed branches. Poor Mrs. Wake, with no one to cheer her, to keep her company evenings! No wonder she had a college girl each summer. Miss Eva could understand that now for the first time. She drew the curtains. Now the room was all closed, shut off from the world, inviting, gay. Crossing to take her place by the fire, she saw her reflection in the mirror, paused to stare. She did not look like the same woman who a few weeks ago in desperation and dismay had seen only the havoc of the years in her image there. Now she was all aglow. Just from having something happen, just from having somebody different in the house. Before she sat down, she stood on the rug before the fire for a minute, looking down into it. If things had been different, if she had married, she might have had a son like Joe, home from college for the holidays, taking care of her, making her feel warm and cherished. But here he was. She sat down.

"That's the idea." Joe put the tray on the table, dropped into Papa's big leather chair saying, "Here we are, here we

are." He handed her one glass and took the other himself. "Here's to you, ma'am."

Miss Eva lifted her drink, smiled across at him. "Here's to you, and lang may your lum reek."

"That's a new one to me. What's it mean?"

"Long may your chimney smoke. An old Scottish toast."

"Well, I've no chimney to smoke, no home fires of my own to keep burning, but it's a nice idea, anyway." He lifted his glass and drank.

"You have my fire to keep burning. And I hope you will feel at home here."

Joe's only response was a low "Thank you, ma'am," but there was real feeling in his voice. They sat silent for a while, then Miss Eva said—the liquor having gone a bit to her head so that she spoke right out what came to her mind—"You never call me anything but *ma'am*."

"No ma'am, that's a fact. But, you see, to say Miss Iveson—there's something cold and distant about that. It's what the Whitman's called you and it reminds me of what I was afraid you'd be like. So——" Then he laughed. "But when I was out getting in this wood I ran into the lady who lives next door. She was out for wood too, and too old to be doing such things. I carried her in a week's supply, by the way."

"Oh, good!" Miss Eva cried. "I know she appreciated it."

"Well, ma'am, I couldn't say as to that—kept assuring me she wasn't in the grave yet and she was quite capable of fetching her own wood."

"That's just her way of talking. She's really kind at heart."

"I'm glad to hear it, ma'am. She sure doesn't wear it on her sleeve. But what I was getting at—she called you Miss Eva. I like that."

"Then call me Miss Eva. Most people do."

He smiled across at her. "Miss Eva—Eva—eternal woman—that's you, ma'am."

"I don't feel very eternal sometimes." She drew a long breath and her eyes went back to the fire, the leaping flames, the smoke rising. If there only were something eternal, lasting, something that did not go up the chimney in smoke,

leaving only ashes. "I feel as ancient and aged as poor Mrs. Starling is always saying she is."

"But you're not. And if you were, don't you know there'd be something young about you still? Why, Miss Eva, you've got the very fountain of youth playing inside you, no matter how you try to dam it up."

Miss Eva relaxed. "Yes, yes," she said dreamily. "Deep, far deep within, it almost seems as if I can hear that fountain playing, bright and gay and eternally leaping." She laughed, gave herself a little shake. "What nonsense! If I hear anything it's likely this whisky rattling round in an empty stomach. But never mind about me. What I want to know is more about you—what you've been doing these last years. Was it the army, and Germany?"

"On the last stretch, yes. Of course," he went on, his feet to the fire, ankles crossed as he lay back comfortably in the big leather chair, "of course I went in originally right from high school, saw some service. That was in the Pacific. Then after VJ-Day they let me out and I went to college. Out in Indiana. Two years, on the GI bill. But"—he gave a little deprecatory shrug—"I'm no scholar. Oh, I liked some of the courses they gave, Lord knows why. But most of them didn't appeal to me. So I quit, drifted around a bit—odd jobs, picking apples in Michigan, selling door to door, all sorts of things. Nothing good. So I went back into the service where at least you know you'll get your next meal, if you're alive, and you don't have to be trying to think what you'll do next. They tell you. That's the best you can say for it. But it wasn't too bad after I got across." He was silent, his eyes on the fire.

What was he seeing in the flames? Miss Eva wondered, sipping her drink. What was it that had brought that faint reminiscent smile to his lips? The memory of some girl? There must have been a girl, many girls. Any young man this nice-looking, this winning in manner could not have escaped them. Perhaps he would tell her sometime.

Joe straightened up abruptly. "I'm forgetting my duties." He took her empty glass and his own, set them on the tray as he rose.

"Anything I can do?"

"Not a thing. Just leave it to me." And he was gone, with his light springy step.

Miss Eva leaned back again. She would leave everything to him. A feeling of deep content spread through her. Joe was a companion, that's what he was. Just what she had dreamed of before Mrs. Hildon began to talk about a sensible middle-aged woman.

He was back in a minute. "Here you are, Miss Eva."

"Oh, not another."

"Do you good. There's plenty out there."

"It's not a question of plenty out there, it's a matter of too much in here."

Joe laughed and took his place with a sigh of content. "Snowing and blowing outside—and this, inside." His glance, his wave of the glass took in the two of them sitting there, the fire, the shadowy room behind them and the sound of the wind in the chimney.

"The tumultuous privacy of storm. Emerson," she said and lapsed into silence. For the moment all her past life seemed set aside, her small restricted world remote, unimportant, thrown out in the storm somewhere, blown out to sea, leaving her spirit free to expand, to breathe deep and free. But could a world be blown out to sea? She was a little confused, maybe, she thought as she set her glass down on the tray at her elbow with a bit more of a crash than she had intended.

"I put some potatoes in the oven last time I was out in the kitchen," Joe said. "I hope that's all right."

"Splendid." Food would probably clear up the matter of the world being blown up or whatever it was. She had always heard that food would clear the head, and heaven knew she had often taken Brother Henry a bowl of bouillon and some crackers so he could make it to the table with proper dignity. Yes, dignity—that was what she must preserve. And yet, dignity, she mused leaning back in her chair, relaxed and easy, what had it ever done for her? She would rather be natural than dignified. Joe was natural. That was his great charm, and being so, he encouraged others to be themselves too. How difficult to be one's self! A child was himself, but how quickly he learned or was driven to cover up, to retreat

behind a false façade, seeking security, privacy against the world. It was only the fearless—or the callous—who dared to be themselves. She glanced across at Joe and found him looking up at the portraits over the mantel. "My mother and father," she said.

"Really? I figured they'd be another generation back, maybe."

"No." With the admission a coldness settled round her heart. She had been born too soon, too soon. Too soon for what? Wouldn't she have made the same mistakes no matter when she was born? Wasn't the fault in her, in her essential self, that she had wrung no richness of experience from life?

"What was his business?"

With an effort Miss Eva brought her mind back to the present reality. "Papa started out as a lawyer—patent law. You see you are not the only one who has made a false start or two. Then he got into manufacturing and stayed in that."

"Hmm. Made it all himself?"

"Well, he had something from his parents, a comfortable amount, and he didn't dissipate his means. Of course Mr. Whitman and the bank take care of everything for me now."

"Yes, the old boy is the kind that loves to clip coupons, even for someone else."

"It's a great relief to me to have him do it. Those scissors in the vault—they used to make my wrist ache."

Joe gave her a quizzical glance. "The price of being comfortable maybe. And speaking of being comfortable, I'd better go start that steak. Will your drink last? I won't be long." He rose.

"Plenty, thank you." She leaned back, closed her eyes. It seemed only a moment—perhaps she had dozed—till she heard the rattle of dishes, looked round to see Joe with a tray in each hand—though that wasn't reasonable. How could he— "Have you really got two trays or are there two of you, or what?"

"I'm a remarkable lad, Miss Eva, but there's just one of me." He set a tray on the table beside her. "I hope this suits you, ma'am."

The steak was more rare than Miss Eva usually had it, but

she took a bite without really looking and found it delicious. Almost at once her head began to reel more slowly, though a pleasant blur remained. There was broccoli, done to a turn, Miss Eva noticed now, and the baked potatoes were perfect. "You're a good cook, Joe. How did you ever learn?"

"Oh, I've been knocking around a long time on my own. As a matter of fact it was this tomato in Germany who taught me quite a bit about cooking," he went on between bites. "Apple stugel, struffel or something like that was her prize dish. Wait till you taste it. Melts in your mouth."

This tomato, Miss Eva puzzled. Perhaps, though, it was like the French *petit chou*. Both were vegetables, and if anything a tomato was more appealing than a cabbage.

"It seems rather an odd thing," she began.

"What, ma'am?"

"A girl's teaching you to cook."

"Well, you see it was one of those old-fashioned German kitchens she lived in—you know, an all-in-one-room effect with the stove and stuff on one side and this kind of curtained-off bed on the other. I'd lie there all snug as a bug in the old feather bed, watching her mix things. Couldn't help but see how she did it. Enough butter for your potato, ma'am?"

"Yes, yes, thank you," she answered absently, puzzling over the situation he had described. Mornings he watched her cooking, this—this tomato. What was he doing there? She looked across at him, watched him mopping up the red gravy with a piece of bread. Don't be an old fool, she told herself. You know very well what he was doing there, living with that girl. But he was so natural, the way he spoke of it, that she couldn't be as shocked as she felt she ought to be. "Must have been quite a cozy little arrangement," she said.

"Cozy is the word for it—while it lasted."

"It didn't last?"

"Not after her husband got home."

"Oh." Miss Eva finished her potato in silence, glancing across at Joe now and then. He looked so large and straightforward and honest and, yes, respectable, she couldn't understand it. Had he no moral sense? "Didn't you ever feel—well, that you were taking something you had no right to?"

"With her?" He laughed. "No, ma'am. If it hadn't been me, it would have been somebody else. I was just filling in, helping her over a tough time."

Well, that was one way of looking at it, Miss Eva supposed. "It seems rather . . . casual."

"That's the only way to keep such things, casual. You don't want anything else. Too many complications."

"Hm-m. I suppose so." Miss Eva finished her dinner in silence, relishing the mince pie which Joe had heated in the oven. It was really interesting, getting a man's point of view on these things. A young man's. Especially as he didn't seem to realize that no one had ever talked to her like this in all her life. "You are so natural," she said at last. "It's altogether disarming."

"Disarming?" He finished his pie with a flattering groan of pleasure."

"Yes. I mean, you make me feel that whatever is natural must be right."

He gave her a puzzled glance. "Well, ma'am, I'd never thought much about it, but it must be so. Otherwise how come we're made the way we are?"

That rather stumped her and she finished her meal in silence.

Joe stacked the dishes, carried them out and was back in a minute, it seemed. "This'll settle that mince pie."

"Oh, but I——" Then all at once she changed her mind, took the drink he put into her hand. What difference did it make? We live only once, she thought, and I got off to a late start.

"I'll join you as soon as I clean up the kitchen," Joe said.

"Don't use too much soap," she called after him and heard him chuckling as he went on his way. She leaned back, feeling utterly comfortable, and sipped her drink. She would take it slowly and make it last the rest of the evening. She had really had enough.

All at once she was sitting up, listening unbelievably. Mrs. Starling? At this hour? Oh dear, she didn't feel in any mood to cope with her right now! If only Joe——

Mrs. Starling's voice came clearly through the house. Joe must have left all the doors open. ". . . made too many some-

how. Brought you over a few just to save them. I thought you might relish light rolls for your breakfast."

"Well, now, that's mighty good of you, ma'am. If there's anything I am partial to, it's light rolls for breakfast."

"Good enough. Oh, you can give Miss Eva some. But they're mostly to fill you up."

Miss Eva listened in amazement. That Joe! It was incredible, but he seemed to have won Mrs. Starling over completely. Mrs. Starling, of all people. "I know how hungry a boy can get," she was continuing. "My own boy Amos"—a rare note came into her voice now, tender, indulgent—"Amos, he was a bottomless pit."

The sound of Joe's laughter came to her, together with Mrs. Starling's brusque cackle, and she missed their next few words. She was remembering all at once a scene still vivid in her mind—Amos, a tall, fine-looking boy, home for the holiday, coming in from swimming with a gash on one knee where he had struck a stone, and his mother running out to meet him. With what tenderness and concern she had bent to examine the cut, holding him still with one hand on his shoulder, the other pressing the bleeding edges together in spite of his protestations that it was nothing! It was as if, now he was a big grown boy, she too seldom got a chance to lay hands on him, to feel and make sure he was real, all there, her own, and now she could not let him go. With one arm around his bare slim waist, she had led him into the house, reaching up just as they disappeared from Miss Eva's sight to push back from his forehead a dripping lock of hair. All the deep, the almost violent love of which she was capable had gone into that only son of hers. A pity they had fallen out over his marriage.

"And where is he now?" Joe was asking.

"Gone, gone. Like everything, if you live long enough." Her voice was back to its normal sharpness.

"Well, ma'am, these rolls will be gone fast enough when I begin on them. I certainly thank you. And remember, I don't want you bringing in any more wood, not while I'm next door."

"Humph," was the only response he got to that. "Where's Miss Eva? Has she felt any ill effects yet from her accident?"

"No, ma'am, but she was tired and went right up after dinner. I'm just finishing here in the kitchen for her. Anything you'd like me to tell her in the morning?"

"No, no, just that I inquired."

"I'll tell her, ma'am. Good night." He closed the door firmly behind her.

Miss Eva drew a long breath and settled back in her chair. That was wonderfully discerning of Joe, to realize that she wouldn't want to see Mrs. Starling tonight. And yet how easily and convincingly he had lied to her! It gave Miss Eva an uneasy feeling, somehow. Of course one often sent down word by a servant that one was not at home. That was an accepted thing. This wasn't really any different. Except for the convincing sincerity of Joe's tone.

However, when he returned a few minutes later, glass in hand, there was something so easy and frank in his manner that she forgot all about it. "You certainly have charmed Mrs. Starling—I never heard her speak so warmly before—and you saw to it, too, that she didn't come in."

"Yes, ma'am, I took care of her. Not a bad old bird, after all."

"'Old bird'—that's good." Miss Eva chuckled. "She was a Dove before she married a Starling, Amanda Dove."

"It's been a long time since there was anything lovey-dovey about her, I'm afraid."

Miss Eva smiled. "I'd have come out, only I didn't feel quite up to her. The spirit was willing but the flesh—the flesh is weak."

"Here's to it," said Joe and lifted his glass.

The wind roared in the chimney—sleet struck against the window-pane, the waves broke alongshore—it must be high tide, Miss Eva thought, and she remembered how many stormy as well as moonlit and more peaceful nights she had stolen out, leaving Mama, or later Papa, to seek some relief from the monotony of her days by walking along the water's edge. But tonight she had no such pressure within her. She had no desire, no need beyond the book-lined walls of the library which seemed to enclose a complete world, a world of peace and companionship. It was what she had been hungry

for all her life, Miss Eva thought dreamily as she sipped the rest of her drink, and now, here in this room, the years seemed to overlap, one time blending with another, the past and the present become one. "Well," she said at last, rousing up, "I'm getting sleepy. I'll go up now. It's been a lovely evening."

Joe rose and went with her to the door. "The first of many, I hope. I've enjoyed it too. You won't mind if I sit up a bit longer? The fire's still going nicely."

"Of course, sit here as long as you like." Then all at once it came over her that she had made no arrangements about where he was to stay. "How stupid of me! I haven't even told you where to get a room." But why shouldn't he just stay here? Since he was doing so much for her—and was so delightful to have around. Heaven knew there was plenty of space in this house, and Clara had made up Brother Henry's bed last week, taking her literally when she had said she wanted everything left as usual there. "Just take the front room upstairs—it has its own bath—the northeast room. You'll be comfortable there."

"Thank you, ma'am." Joe made his little formal bow. "Good night."

"Good night, Joe." And how nice it was to have someone to say good night to! Miss Eva made her way upstairs a bit unsteadily—was it the unaccustomed drinks or was it just that the pleasure of such an evening by the fire had gone to her head?

In her own room, she closed the door, leaned against it. Oh dear, she must not let Joe bring her so many drinks, never again! Everything was whirling. It seemed to have struck her all at once. Yes, this was her room. Closet, nightgown, bedsocks, unbutton, peel out, hang up clothes, bathroom, brush teeth, prayers, bed—all very simple. She had done it a thousand times, maybe a million. Let's see, three hundred and sixty-five times per year for how many years?—nine times five—but there was leap year—give it up. The main thing was to get to the bed. With that she gathered strength and balance, took a flying start and landed there. Everything was all right, all right now. But the light? Never mind the light, she couldn't reach it. It would run up the bill, one sober

corner of her mind told her. "No matter," Miss Eva murmured into her pillow. "To—to hell with the Plymouth County Electric Light Co.!" She laughed to herself. Really, I must be far gone, not to care about wasting electricity. And with that she was out, as the light should have been.

7

THE DAYS settled into a pattern now for Miss Eva. She woke each morning with a sense of eagerness, a feeling of being wholly alive and in the midst of things. Then, a leisurely breakfast with talk—it was amazing how many things she and Joe found to talk about—and with laughter—it was incredible, when she stopped to consider it, how much they found to laugh over. The mornings for Joe were filled with the many small jobs around the house. He seemed to have a gift for discovering repairs that needed to be made while Miss Eva watched admiringly. Then a pickup lunch, her nap or a sun bath and later, if the day were fine, a walk together along-shore and finally dinner by the fire in the library with the cheerful chink of ice in the nightcap glass Joe insisted was good for her.

Joe seemed strangely contented—at least Miss Eva, when she thought about it, found it rather strange. It was as if he wanted nothing more than this quiet life. It must be, she decided at last, that he had never had a home, and now, feeling at home here, he could not get enough of it. Or never having known his own mother, perhaps he found in her something for which he had been longing all his life. He even complained of her absence the day she went to Mrs. Hildon's for her weekly bridge, said he made the apple tarts for dinner that night because the house just seemed too empty with her away.

It was toward the end of the week, a morning of feathery snow outside, that the phone interrupted them at breakfast. "This is the day they were to call up about the car," Joe said as he went to answer. "And high time—they've taken ages longer than they should have."

A moment later Miss Eva heard his voice in the back hall: "Hello, hello." Then, dropping to a low intimate note she had never heard before: "Hi, honey, how you doing? When you going to let me buy you another coke? . . . Yeah? . . . I'll take you up on that someday soon. . . . Well, let me speak to him. . . . How are you, Ben? . . . Yes, I had an idea you'd find all sorts of trouble. . . . Sure, that's the idea. Just so you don't forget our little— . . . O.K., O.K. We'd better drop around. . . . That's nice of you. Wait till I check with Miss Iveson."

What an easy friendly way he had! Miss Eva thought. He ought to go in for some work where he would be dealing with people instead of books and figures. It was ridiculous, Mr. Whitman's notion of making an accountant out of him. "Well, what's the news?" she inquired as he came back into the kitchen.

"I really think we'd better go over to the garage and see about the car. It's so much better than trying to talk on the phone and you can see for yourself."

"Why, I don't know a thing about the inside of cars or anything."

"Leave that to me, but I'll have more authority with you there. Besides, it'll do you good to get out this snowy morning."

"But to walk so far——"

"Oh, he'll come by and pick us up. How about it?"

"All right then. I'll be ready before he can get here."

"Swell. I'll tell him just to come along. And be sure you put on your galoshes. This snow is wet." He went back to the phone.

Miss Eva sat a moment more over her empty coffee cup. "Put on your galoshes," he had said. When had anybody told her that? Not for a million years. It gave her the warmest, the most cherished feeling!

A few minutes later, sitting on the back seat of the car, Joe and the garage man in front—"Just call me Ben," he had said—she was delighted that she had agreed to come. Along the lane the green cedars were laden with snow, weighted down into new shapes, the stiff stalks of the shad-bushes

bowed to more graceful lines by the wet snow that clung to every twig. How lovely it all was, she thought as they passed down the main street where the old elms laced a bright network against the grey sky and the white houses, green-shuttered and charming in their neat colonial lines, stood stately and yet homelike, blue wood smoke rising from a chimney here and there, and occasionally, giving life to the scene, someone out with a broom sweeping the light snow from a doorstep.

Beyond the shopping centre, the road dipped down to cross a culvert over one of the salt arms of the bay, the water black now between snowy banks. They mounted a slight rise, rounded a curve and came into a long straight stretch where the bare elms arched overhead and white fields spread out on either side. Miss Eva had not realized till now how much she had been missing, staying home, seeing nothing beyond Shadbush Lane. The woods and the water had always given her pleasure. They had been her refuge and her consolation during the long years when she had been oppressed by the narrow life that had closed in about her. Now she found new delight in the countryside, its pure wintry look, yet with the air today mild enough to give promise that spring might really come again someday. It was as if she, like the earth, old and winter-laden, felt the first signal of renewal.

"That car of yours is in pretty bad shape, Miss Iveson," Ben said as they turned off the bay road. "Yes, ma'am, I was just telling Joe, we didn't know till we got it all apart just how bad it was. The carburettor is about gone, the main bearing——"

"Oh dear," Miss Eva murmured, listening with but half her mind as he described the deplorable state of the motor.

"What you need, of course, is a new car," Ben continued. "Much more sensible than putting out a lot of money on this one. We can fix it, though, if that's what you want."

"A new car? Well, that's an idea." And why not? Miss Eve thought as they followed a crossroad over to the main highway. She had never had a car of her very own. It might be rather nice to begin afresh, wipe out all associations and

learn to drive on a really good car. "I understand the new models are easier to drive," she said.

That set Ben off at once on an explanation of just how much easier the new gearshift was, with Joe putting in a word or two from time to time. Miss Eva paid little attention to the technical talk they were giving her, but went on with her own thoughts. Papa had always believed in keeping up with the times, having the best of everything available at the moment, and, after all, there was no reason why she shouldn't continue the tradition.

They turned in now at a new-looking garage on the main street, a brick building she had never noticed before, with a workshop on one side, a showroom of new cars on the other. Inside, she found her own car almost unrecognizable, with its hood up, wheels off and its insides strewn about on the floor beside it. Ben had only begun to point out some of the worst troubles when a young girl in a red sweater came out of the office and called him to the phone. She waved and smiled at Joe, started toward him, then, seeing Miss Eva, changed her mind and went back toward the office. How pretty and young she was! Miss Eva thought, aware of Joe's eyes following her. She must have been the one he had spoken to on the phone—probably got acquainted with her that day he brought the car over. "It all looks rather hopeless," Miss Eva said, with a gesture toward her old car. Then, as Joe did not answer—he was still watching the girl—she said, "Why don't we just look at what he has there in the showroom?"

That brought Joe to instant attention. "A good idea, Miss Eva. There are several nice models in there."

Not the nauseous green, Miss Eva decided and moved over to a dark-blue sedan. "This doesn't look too bad, though there is more chromium trim than I really like." She turned to Joe, but he was on the other side of the room standing with an expression of rapt admiration beside a black convertible. That's what he would like, she thought, with indulgence. Well, why not get it? True, it was rather more dashing than was suitable, and yet, hadn't she reached the age when she needed a little extra dash? She walked over to stand beside Joe. "I've always liked a black car," she said.

He looked round quickly. "Oh, this is a beauty—white-wall tyres, and look at that interior." He opened the door, revealing red-leather seats. "This is the real thing."

Miss Eva got in behind the wheel. "Very comfortable indeed," she said. Of course nobody need see the red inside, and nothing could be more discreet than the black outside. "I suppose it wouldn't be as draughty as Papa's old Franklin touring car."

"Oh, they make them airtight nowadays, just as snug as a closed car. And for summer, with the top down—oh, Miss Eva, you would love that! You're really outdoors when you go somewhere with the top down."

"Yes, I would like that, to be able to see all around, the stars at night, the whole of the sky——" Suddenly, as she spoke, she was back in Paris, riding in that open barouche with Mama and Pierre, Mama laughing, Pierre leaning toward her, his hand on her knee . . . Miss Eva gave herself a little shake. "I don't suppose it costs more than—well, a few thousand dollars."

Joe gave her a glance that was a mixture of wistfulness and wonder. "It doesn't."

"Well, let me see——" She opened her purse. Did she have the right chequebook with her?

"You mean you really might——" He was speechless for a moment. Then, as Miss Eva put on her glasses and examined her chequebook, he said, the words stumbling out, "Don't worry about the money. He'll give you good terms. Take as long as you like to pay for it."

Miss Eva looked as shocked as she felt. "Why, I wouldn't dream of buying anything I couldn't pay cash for."

Ben came up just then. "Now that's a nice little model, Miss Iveson."

"Yes, so it seems."

"How about letting us take her out on the road for a trial run?" Joe put in.

"Sure," said Ben. "Had her out the other day for a customer and she runs like a dream."

And a few minutes later, out on the road with Joe at the wheel, the car did indeed seem to run like a dream, for the

main highway was clear of snow and on the long new stretch toward Plymouth, Joe really, as he said, let her out.

Miss Eva sat forward on the seat, eager and excited. Ordinarily she would have been terrified by such swift motion—a glance at the speedometer told her they were going nearly eighty miles an hour—but now all she felt was a wild exhilaration, a recklessness wholly new to her. It was as if she were being borne away, swept out of her hum-drum prosaic life into another existence where anything might happen. “Joe, let’s try it with the top down.”

He slowed up at once. “I’m afraid it’ll blow you to bits. You need a scarf or something.”

“But I have one.” She loosened the brown-and-gold scarf from around her throat, placed it over her little brown hat and tied it under her chin while Joe came to a stop by the roadside under a great oak tree, snow-laden to the tiniest twig. He reached up, and in two seconds had turned the levers, pressed a button. The top began to rise, fold back.

“Just like magic,” Miss Eva breathed in wonder. Then looking up into the branches overhead, intricate and beautiful against the dark grey sky, she cried, “This is heavenly!”

“I’ll go slower now, so you won’t feel it too much. But it’ll give you an idea of what it’s like.” He looked as pleased as a child with a new toy, Miss Eva thought. Oh, she didn’t care how much this car cost! It was worth anything just to see Joe so happy. He turned a button on the dash, and as they got back onto the road, music enveloped them, mingled with the rushing air to create a new element in which they were borne along. Joe had tuned in on one of the new Boston concert stations that played classical music all day—Beethoven, was it?—so that now, to speed and air and freedom of view that made them a part of earth and wind and sky, there was added the yet more liberating magnificence of sound, transporting, beautiful. Miss Eva leaned back, drunk with the wonder of it.

She felt herself a part of the world now, the living world. That other day when she had taken her first sun bath, she had felt something of this same merging with the elements, but then it had been with a sense of resignation, of dispersal,

of final dissolution into the inanimate. Now she was one with the eternal persistence of nature triumphant over time and eternity. It was the difference between life and death.

"Getting hungry?"

Miss Eva came to with a start. "Why, here we are at the canal already! What time is it?" She glanced at her watch. She wasn't in the least hungry, but probably Joe was. "It might be a good idea to stop—unless we are staying out longer than we should. After all the car isn't mine yet."

Joe laughed. "Ben knew he'd sold it when you agreed to try it out."

Miss Eva did not deny that, but she knew the moment when she had decided it—it was standing there beside the car in the garage when there had come to her swiftly and overpoweringly the memory of the open barouche, Mama and Pierre, the sun, the bright-blue sky and the dancing balloons. Why, why had such a remote small incident brought her to instant decision? Oh, she dismissed it with a shrug, just remembering the feel of being young, perhaps. "Well," she said, "let's see, we're headed toward Bourne. There used to be a very nice eating place right on down the road a bit. We'll try that."

"Righto, ma'am. Anything you say."

The restaurant was still there, just beyond the town, and when they had parked the car and were seated at a small table, Joe looked round, sniffed the air with that relish he brought to all physical pleasures and said, "Smells like something good. Lobster, maybe? How about it?" He took up the menus, handed one to Miss Eva.

"No lobster for me, thank you. Not after that big breakfast. Soup, tea and some fruit for dessert, maybe." Then, seeing Joe's crestfallen face, she laughed and said, "But do have it yourself and anything else you want. I'll enjoy watching you eat it."

"I'll enjoy eating it, then." And he ordered a meal that seemed to Miss Eva like a Thanksgiving dinner at least.

The bill was something of a shock—how prices had gone up since she had come here with Papa long ago—but that didn't matter. What did matter was the appreciative way Joe looked

at her across the table as he finished the lemon pie he had ordered for dessert.

Back in the car again, Joe said, "Want to drive home?"

"Me?" Miss Eva cried aghast. "No, no, not today. Later I'll have a lesson, but today I just want to revel in it."

"That's the spirit." Joe smiled. "But I'll put up the top now. I don't want you catching cold."

Miss Eva started to protest, for the clouds were breaking, showing here and there deep-blue patches of sky. But when Joe had pressed the button and the top rose again as if by magic, settling down into place with a small puff, she was glad to have it down. They were enclosed now in a little private world, warm, intimate and still in the midst of motion.

At the garage Ben came out to meet them and Joe could not wait for her to give the word. "Sold, Ben," he cried. "It's a beauty, runs like a house afire."

Miss Eva took up her pocketbook from the seat beside her. "You will take my cheque?"

"I'll be glad to, ma'am," Ben said. "Just a minute and I'll make out the bill. I'll allow you all I possibly can on the old car."

Miss Eva leaned back with a sigh of pleasure. She hadn't had so much excitement in years.

"No regrets? You sure?" Joe asked anxiously.

"Not one." Miss Eva smiled. She took the slip Ben brought, got out her glasses and studied it. So much for the old car—and plenty, no doubt, considering the shape Brother Henry and she had allowed it to get into. Take that from the price of the new car—she went over the figures carefully, for she never trusted anyone completely about figures, especially someone not known to her like this Ben, though he looked honest enough. Yes, it seemed all right. She made out the cheque. "There." She handed it to him through the window. "Is that all I need to do?"

"That's a plenty, eh, Ben?" Joe said.

"That covers it. Of course, ma'am, there's the matter of the transfer of papers and——"

"Oh dear, I might have known it couldn't be this simple."

"But how about leaving the dealer's licence on till tomorrow, Ben? Then I can run over to Plymouth——"

"Brockton," Ben said.

"Well, Brockton, and get everything fixed up."

"Suits me," Ben said.

Joe got out of the car. "I'll come into the office with you and get—er—the bill of sale and all that."

Miss Eva sat waiting, glad of a moment's quiet after all the excitement. She was tired now, ready for her afternoon nap. She examined the glove department, turned the radio on and off, felt the leather seats. It really was a beautiful car. She would enjoy it, let herself just revel in it. She had waited long enough to have a car of her own, heaven knew! But what was keeping Joe? Through the glass wall of the office she could see him talking earnestly with Ben. He seemed to be arguing with him. Then they moved beyond her sight and after a few moments Joe appeared, papers in his hand. He paused in the doorway to fasten his jacket and pat his pocket, then came to the car, whistling as he came.

"Here's your bill of sale, Miss Eva. Better put it in your purse. And the other papers I'll pick up tomorrow." He started the car, cocked an ear and said, "Runs so pretty you can barely hear it," and they headed homeward.

Miss Eva had one uneasy qualm as they went down Shadbush Lane and turned at Mrs. Hildon's corner. What would her old friends think of her for getting such a dashing model? No matter, no matter. Let them think what they pleased. She liked the car, Joe liked it. That was all that was important.

8

THE JANUARY thaw was over. Winter really closed in now on the village, on Shadbush Lane. It had come late this year, holding off all fall, but as the old-timers said, it was bound to hit some time, sooner or later. Miss Eva scarcely noticed its coming, beyond putting on her galoshes as a matter of routine and getting out her heavier coat. There was just so much to take up her time. She was doing more of the cooking than Joe had allowed her to do when he first came. Perhaps he

saw what pleasure she took in making pies and hot breads and other things that he specially relished; perhaps he saw that she had for too many years done for other people and so could not without actual discomfort allow herself to be done for by someone else.

There was no great change in her days, really, just an enlargement, a widening range. Even so simple a thing as going to market in the new car, instead of ordering as she had done for so long, became something of an adventure. Joe loved food, as indeed he seemed to love all physical comforts—he had been so much deprived of them, poor boy, Miss Eva thought—and to have him at her side, rolling one of the wheeled market baskets provided for shoppers by the supermarket in the village, gave added zest to the bi-weekly excursion. Joe was there to consult, to advise her, to remind her of what she already had in the refrigerator at home and what was lacking. Everything she bought was with a view to pleasing him, for she herself had the habit of accommodating her likes and dislikes to the taste of others.

One morning at the vegetable counter, she turned to him saying, "Mushrooms, Joe? Do they appeal to you today? With the steak——" Her eyes at that moment caught sight of an acquaintance, a woman who had recently bought a house on the main street—that is, she had moved in only six or eight years ago—and Miss Eva, bowing absent-mindedly, was startled to attention by the look on her face. Was it curiosity? Yes, but more than that, something alert and sharp. She was like a dog given pause in his play by the sudden scent of a rabbit on the wind.

Miss Eva turned away, let Joe select the mushrooms while she moved on to the next counter. But the incident, small as it was, stayed in her mind, returned even more vividly at times, assuming an importance greater than seemed reasonable. Was there anything wrong in her consulting Joe about mushrooms, or anything else, for that matter? It was strictly her own affair. After all, he had to cook them, help eat them. But that woman—— She shrugged it away. Why should she care what anyone thought?

At least she was spared Mrs. Starling's criticism, her dire

predictions that no good would come of this young man in her neighbour's house. Joe had won her over completely. Not that she said much in his favour; it was rather a negative approval she gave him, grudgingly, no more than a faint softening of tone when she spoke of him, or a reminiscent gleam in her eye when on her way over for a brief morning visit, she saw him running out to the mailbox and paused to look after him. Or when, bringing over some leftovers, as she called them, she heard his admiring exclamations and the taut muscles of her face relaxed to a half-smile. "He seems to be a good enough teacher" was the most she ever said about him, as Miss Eva's skill at the wheel became more evident.

Each day that the roads were clear, Miss Eva had a driving lesson. Joe was patient, encouraging, and only laughed at her mistakes. With him beside her she had no fear of her inadequacy with mechanical things, only a rare sense of increasing mastery, of power. It was a real triumph the first day he let her drive out the Powder Point road and over the long bridge across the bay to what was generally called the big beach. When she drew up there on the parking lot, he praised her for doing everything just right. It went to her head a bit, being so warmly praised. All her life, doing a thing properly had been rather taken for granted and there would be no comment unless she failed. But that was not Joe's way. She found his approval wonderfully exhilarating as she sat there in the car that afternoon with the brake on, the ignition off, the gear set at P for parking. Between the dunes, the ocean showed a deep rich blue under the slanting winter sun. High surf roared over the level sand. Joe's glance followed hers. Usually he was curiously blind to the physical world, left it to her to call his attention to the clouds or the ice patterns on the window, but today he said, "Looks rather nice. How about taking our walk along here instead of down by the marsh?"

"Good enough," Miss Eva agreed. They came out on the beach, deserted at this season, the houses at the far north end closed and shuttered against the storms and, down the other way, only the curving empty sand, banked off from the bay by dunes, tufted now with brown wind-blown grasses and the

black-brown stalks of sea goldenrod. "Let's go toward the lighthouse."

"All the way?" Joe groaned.

"No, no, that's five or six miles, much too far. But I like to see it ahead of us with the cottages clustered round. Like a set of toy buildings. Like a picture in a book of fairy tales. See how the sun hits across it, all gold. Oh, I love it out here, and I haven't been over in so long." Not since she gave up swimming, heaven only knew how many years ago. But she would not let her thoughts go backward into that time. The past had nothing, the present held all.

"Not bad," Joe agreed.

Walking beside him, lengthening her step to fit his, Miss Eva was glad that she had always been active enough to keep her muscles in good shape, glad to be able to move effortlessly with him across the hard-packed smooth sand close to the scalloping waves that swept in, and withdrew, giving brighter colour to the little wet pebbles, leaving opalescent bubbles of foam that broke and vanished only to be formed anew with the next wave. Oh, it was good to be alive, to breathe the salty clean air, to see, to feel, to be away from all the world, to be free—and not to be alone! Two human souls they were, two, and so not desolate. They were drawn together by the vastness of the sea, and their own smallness. Yet they were somehow one with it, partaking of its immensity.

Joe? Did he see all that she saw? Did he feel all that she felt? She glanced round at him, found that he was in one of his rare serious moods, walking steadily on, eyes on the sand at his feet. He seemed utterly unaware of his surroundings. And yet, Miss Eva thought, even in this detachment and all unconsciously, he was perhaps, more than she, a part of the scene. Moving with the light springy step that gave always the suggestion of greater power in reserve, he seemed as easy in his movements, as tireless as the waves that came rolling in eternally; he seemed as relentless, and as inevitable.

He looked up now, turned to her with the quick responsive look that was one of his charms, the visible evidence that he was aware of her presence, of her legitimate demand on him. "Walking too fast for you?"

"No. Not at all. I hate to dawdle. I was just wondering what had put you in such a brown study."

"I'm sorry." Then suddenly, as if he too had felt their togetherness against the stretch of waters beside them, as if he too were liberated in some way by the open scene, he added, "I was just thinking. This girl——"

Miss Eva waited as he continued by her side, his eyes on the sand. Then she said, "The one . . . in Germany . . . who taught you to cook?"

"Not that one. But it was over there. An American. Lord, I really fell for her! She was in one of the government offices. . . . We went off on vacation together—place on the Belgian seacoast, Knokke. There was a stretch of sand, like this. You could see the big boats 'way off coming out of Antwerp."

"Yes," Miss Eva said as he fell silent again. "And up above the beach there was the tiered sea wall and the open paved plaza in front of the hotels where there were music and dancing at night. At least I suppose it is still all the same."

"You've been there?" Joe turned on her, amazed.

"Yes, we were there for a while, Mama and I, one of the summers we were over. I forget just how we happened to go—someone told us, maybe, that it was less crowded than Ostend." It was the summer trip that had lengthened out to two years, and she had sat on the terrace overlooking the north sea, the hotels all in a row behind her; she had answered when Mama spoke, agreed when she should agree; she had run to the hotel room for Mama's shawl when the evening air grew cool; she had sat hearing the string band playing, in the open there, soft and sweet to the accompaniment of the breaking waves below the wall; and all the time her heart was straining back across the distance, her thoughts were skimming over the ocean, back to America, to Elmer. Mama had made her promise not to write to him till they got home. But thoughts were free. No promise could bind them. Miss Eva sighed. "Yes, we visited many of the resort places. Mama was fond of the sea."

"That's funny."

Miss Eva gave him an inquiring glance. "That I should have gone there? But after all, the distances are not so great

as here. One gets to most of the popular places, and Knokke had quite a name at one time." What was strange was that she could have been dreaming of Elmer over there beside the sea, and that Joe, here, was thinking with longing of a time which he had spent in the same place. Were the young always wanting what was not, always grieving for something or someone who was not here, reaching out as the waves reached for the shore, falling back empty only to reach again and again, and fail. But the young had no monopoly on frustration, Miss Eva thought with a wry smile.

"I mean," Joe went on, "what struck me as funny is your ever having been anywhere but just right here. Silly of me, but it's where I found you and it's where I think of you as having been forever, just as you are. It kind of throws me out of joint to think of you elsewhere, especially over there."

Miss Eva made no reply. A vague depression had begun to settle on her when Joe spoke of this girl, and now it seemed to penetrate into her very bones. The sound of the sea, which a few moments before had been so challenging and cheerful, was now a dull and threatening roar, like time and eternity creeping up on her, inevitable, overwhelming. But she must not think of herself now. This was the first time Joe had confided in her—except of course that casual account of how he learned to cook certain German dishes. She turned to him now, forcing herself to speak as usual. "But it didn't work out? With this girl?"

"Oh, for a while. Seems as if it's always that way. Things are wonderful at first. Then, I don't know, they get to finding fault, want to make you over. But this lasted longer than usual. In fact it was on her account that I came up this way. She lives north of Boston. She was through her stretch of service before I got out, so she got home before me. I came as soon as I could, but I had to go through these medical examinations and all that, so I was longer than I had expected. . . . When I got here, the whole thing fell through. . . . Oh, they all want too much, expect you to give them the earth. Girls—I'm sick of them." His tone was bitter. He stooped, gathered up a handful of pebbles and skimmed them one at a time over the flat wake of the breaking waves. Then as if

the physical action had changed his mood, he turned on Miss Eva with a rueful smile. "I don't know why I've been raking up all this, boring you with it."

"I'm not bored. I'm glad you told me." For it did explain his having settled down so completely into her quiet life. He had needed time to recover from his disappointment. "Maybe talking about it will help you get it out of your system."

"Oh, I'm all over it now. It was just being out here, walking the beach and all. It's all over and done with," he repeated with emphasis, almost as if trying to convince himself.

"There are plenty more girls in the world, after all, and you'll be off before you know it, out of this isolated life, back into the middle of things again, meeting new people, having a gay time——" All at once she could go no farther. A tightness came into her throat, an ache that spread all through her. She could not bear to think of that bleak time when Joe would no longer be with her. She slowed her step. "We've gone far enough." Her voice was strained and uneven.

But for once Joe did not seem to notice. "Well," he said as they turned and started back, "believe it or not, I'm really settled into my life here. You may have a hard time getting rid of me."

Miss Eva looked up at him unsmiling. If only that were true! But all she said was "Don't worry. I won't throw you out." No, not that. The time would come, however, when he would go, no matter what he said. She could not prevent it. So what was there to do? What had she done other times when the inevitable was upon her—disappointment, death? She drew a long breath, flung back her head. She had faced those things, she could weather this too when it came. And meanwhile—she looked up at the blue sky with white wispy clouds, wind-strewn, delicate and lovely, at the darker sea, the far horizon ruffled by the unbroken swells—yes, meanwhile, here was the lovely blue-and-golden present. That was all anyone had, ever.

"You walk like a queen of the Vikings, Miss Eva," Joe said. "You've got me winded."

Miss Eva turned a flashing eye on him. "If you haven't any more wind than that, I'll have to put you to chopping wood, to develop it. No wind at your age indeed! It's ridiculous."

Joe laughed. "I love to see you when you go at me tooth and nail—like about the soap flakes, and the way you came after me with the poker that first morning."

"I may brain you yet," Miss Eva retorted, and so they came back to the car in high spirits.

At home while Joe stayed out to wipe off the car—he took beautiful care of it—Miss Eva, humming to herself, began to get dinner ready. The veal cutlets Joe had brought home that morning—for she had lately been letting him do the marketing for her—were not so tender as what she would have demanded, and received, from the butcher. For all the tradespeople knew her, knew Miss Iveson would have nothing but the best. It was queer too, she thought as she whipped up a batter, that several times lately the meat had been of poor quality, though he was certainly charged enough for it. She would have to speak to Joe, tell him to be more careful. It was going to take all her skill to render these cutlets edible.

They were, however, highly so, and the French fried potatoes done to perfection too, Joe declared. So that by the time they had finished and were settled for the evening by the fire in the library, Miss Eva felt that it had been a more than usually satisfactory meal. Joe was in good spirits, too, and looking not only handsome but well-dressed. He had come in, black-handed, from cleaning the car, a smudge of grease across the knee of what Miss Eva knew were his only decent trousers, and on a sudden impulse she had suggested that he try to find something in Brother Henry's closet. "His things are doing nobody any good, and I don't like to see anything not being used. You are about of a size," she had said, adding rather hesitantly, "You wouldn't mind?" Joe had not minded. On the contrary he seemed delighted with the idea, and by the time she had dinner ready to serve, he had come in all clean and shining. He made her his little formal bow and then paraded up and down the kitchen showing off what a good fit he had in the brown tweed jacket and the slacks of a lighter tan that went with them. He had found one of Brother Henry's nice shirts too, and with one of his lovely hand-knit brown-and-gold ties, he did indeed present an elegant appearance.

Miss Eva had walked round and round him when he finally stood still long enough for her to do so. "I'm as delighted as if I had invented you," she declared, seeing how well his broad shoulders filled out the jacket, noting the trim line of his waist, the length of limb. She had thought it might give her an uncomfortable feeling to see the familiar garments on someone else, but Joe was altogether different from Brother Henry, who had lost weight during his last years so that his clothes just hung on him. On Joe they were dashing, much more so than they could ever have seemed on him.

She looked across the hearth at Joe now. "Tomorrow's your day off and you must be sure to wear this outfit—or one of the others, when you go. What are you going to do with your day?"

Joe did not seem very enthusiastic. "Poke around in Boston, I suppose. May drop in on the Whitmans'. I suppose I should see them once in a while?"

"How do you get there? I believe they live quite a distance out and I don't know how the trolleys run."

"Oh, I'll hitch my way."

"See here, why not take the car? I won't need it. And anyway, heaven knows I can't drive it by myself till I get my licence. Do."

Joe looked at her with wonder. "You—you'd trust me with it?"

"Why, certainly. Don't I trust you every day you take me out in it? I'd trust you to the moon and back with everything I have in the world, if the occasion arose."

Joe continued to stare at her, sitting oddly limp, as if he had somehow just been deflated. It seemed as if he could make no reply of any sort.

"Don't look at me like that. You give me the jitters." Miss Eva laughed. "What's struck you all of a sudden?"

"Oh, me? N-nothing. I mean——" He shook his head, gave it up, began again. "Honestly, you make me feel like a heel."

"And why on earth should you feel like a heel, for heaven's sake?" Miss Eva demanded.

Joe faced her, his arms resting on the arm of the chair. "I'll just tell you, my dear Miss Eva. In the first place you

pay me far more than I am worth. I'll be ashamed to tell the Whitmans if they ask me—and I know he is going to the next time I go there. And you nearly always add on something extra, fare to Boston, or something for the movies, you know you do, and——”

“But that's nothing. I——”

“What's more, you wait on me, you do entirely too much cooking—only you do it so beautifully that I haven't the moral courage to say no when you put that apron on.” He grinned at her. “Now you hand over a complete wardrobe and offer me the car on my day off. And besides all that, you listen to me when I gripe about my sad affairs of the heart and——”

“Enough, enough!” Miss Eva laughed. “Keep on and I'll start charging you for staying here. Just remember I don't do anything I don't want to do.”

Joe turned away with a shake of his head. “I just can't understand it. It's you, of course—there's nobody like you in this world.”

“Humph,” Miss Eva said and reminded herself of Mrs. Starling's grunt when embarrassed by thanks. But she was not embarrassed, she was delighted that Joe was so appreciative. It made her long to do still more for him.

Joe leaned back in his chair, his eyes on the fire. “There's only one other person I've met in my life that was as kind and generous as you. Funny, too, the first minute I saw you I thought of her. The eyes, maybe.”

“Who was she?” Miss Eva asked after a little. “That is, if you want to talk about her.”

“I talk about anything to you—that's one of the amazing things about you, that you make me feel I can come right out with things and you won't think the less of me. This isn't a very pretty story. But I was just such a kid. She was the first girl I ever—ever fell in love with.”

He was silent for a bit, his eyes on the fire. He put another log on and waited till it caught, then leaned back again. “After my grandfather was—I mean after he died,” Joe went on, “I was alone in the world. I was eleven years old, and I got sent down to this sort of mission school. It wasn't bad.

They made me study. Had to get up at five every morning, do all sorts of work around the place, then school and more work. My last year, there was this girl."

"How old were you then?"

"Seventeen. She came from deep down in the bayou country, an orphan. The rest of the family had been drowned in one of those Gulf storms they get down there. . . . I was crazy about that girl. Big dark violet-blue eyes, she had, and a sort of gypsy look about her."

Joe was not too good at describing things, as a matter of fact he just didn't notice, Miss Eva had often thought, and yet more by tone than words now he made her see this little wild thing, rescued when a tidal wave swept over that flat swampy country, found clinging to the palmetto roof of a flimsy shack set on stilts at the edge of a bayou, two great snakes beside her and her drowned little brother in her arms. What an experience for a child to have lived through! It was something so remote, so altogether foreign to Miss Eva that she felt as if she had been reading one of Brother Henry's fantastic tales. All this Joe had known, or at least had touched at second hand. And now here he sat, years later beside a New England fire, telling her, Eva Iveson, this strange, this almost incredible tale.

"She was scared to death when they brought her in. Couldn't speak English, wouldn't eat, went around like a frightened little ghost. Then one morning before day she came into the kitchen. I was doing kitchen detail that week—all the older ones took turns at it. I was baking yams and maybe she smelled them. I pretended I didn't see her and she crept closer and closer, and when I held out a yam to her, she snatched it out of my hand and ran into the corner and gnawed at it like a dog, burning me up all the time with those big wide eyes." Joe came back to the present with a sigh, looked round at Miss Eva. "Just the way you glared at me that first morning with the poker in your hand." He reached down beside the table, took up the bottle he had brought in with their after-dinner drinks.

"Just a drop," Miss Eva said, holding out her glass.

He gave her a little more than a drop, filled his own glass

and went on. "I was the only one she would have anything to do with for a long time. I taught her English and she taught me French. Just the patois but good enough so I could make myself understood when I got sent across. She was scared to death when the wind blew. And we were close enough to the Gulf to get some real gales now and then. That was how it happened—the first time. I was serving my turn at sleeping out in the shack where the electric plant was. It had to be tended like a baby or it would go off. We had a big blow that night—half the pecan trees on the place were flat when daylight came. She came out, scared to death, poor kid."

Joe was silent, Miss Eva waited, not quite sure what he meant. But the next words made it all too clear to her. "So after that it went on, and of course, eventually they caught up with us. Oh, I wanted to marry her. They said we were too young. I didn't have a job, all that tripe. But I could have got a job, down in the oil country there. I've often wondered how things would have worked out. . . . Well, anyway, I left, by request, and that was the end of that. But she was a rare one, never gave a thought to herself. It was always me she was looking out for, wanting to do for."

"What became of her? Did you ever hear?"

"Yes. They married her off, and none too soon, I dare say, to a man that ran a supply store in the town there."

None too soon? Miss Eva puzzled, not wanting to think what she had to think. After a little she asked, "Did you ever see her again?"

Joe laughed. "I saw her. About six years later. I went by there on purpose—right after I got back from the Pacific. She had four children, weighed all of two hundred pounds! And me, romantic young fool, with my discharge money in my pocket, thinking I'd pick her up and take her away with me! Lord, that was really funny. She didn't want to be rescued, any more than I wanted to rescue her, after I saw her. She was perfectly satisfied with her life there. Couldn't shoo me out fast enough." He laughed, but there was no merriment in the sound. "Not that I wanted to stay after I had one look at her. It was just a dream I'd built up. Taught me a lesson all right."

"She was really happy, then," Miss Eva said with wonder.

"Sure she was. But that oldest kid of hers—Lord, he was a cute little brat! Her eyes, but the rest of him——" Joe chuckled. "A little towhead if there ever was one. Lord knows how she explained him. Her husband was dark, a French-Spanish mixture like they have down there. But being an orphan I suppose she could claim her parents were blond. After I saw him I understood why she was in such a dither to get me out of the house before her husband came home for dinner. The kid was my spitting image all right." Joe laughed, sipped his drink.

Miss Eva said nothing. She could think of nothing to say. It was Joe's casual attitude that shocked her most of all. His own child, left apparently without a qualm, to grow up in such an environment! On the other hand, what could he do? Maybe that was the best way to take it, in this offhand manner. But—— She gave it up, though her heart went out to that little child who looked just like Joe. She wished she could do something for him. A blond, like Joe, and with eyes like his mother's, like my own, Miss Eva thought. In her mind, the picture of him merged with the child she herself had once dreamed of having. If Joe had come during those years, if she were younger now—— She shook her head, put away the thought. The story had saddened her somehow, and yet she was glad to have heard it. Maybe it explained that rather callous attitude he seemed to have towards girls in general. Maybe it explained to some extent that episode with the German girl, and perhaps others which he had not told her about. Or was this casualness of his not something peculiar to him, but part of a modern attitude toward such things? After all, she had grown up in a different generation, with different ideas about all this sort of thing. Yet were not the fundamentals always the same? She was still pondering over this when a knock sounded at the front door. "Who in the world——"

"I'll get it," Joe said, starting to rise.

"No, please, let me. I'd rather." She didn't know why she felt she must go herself. It just seemed more fitting. And if it was Mrs. Wake, the only person who ever came in the

evening, maybe she could dispose of her without having to bring her back to the library.

But no such luck. "I saw your light on in the library, so I just ran over to tell you about Mrs. Hildon," Mrs. Wake said.

"Come on in." Miss Eva resigned herself to it. She did begrudge having her evening with Joe broken into, especially as he would be away all day tomorrow. But there was no help for it.

Joe rose as they entered, made his little formal bow, and Mrs. Wake who had opened her mouth to speak to him was suddenly struck dumb. She stood there staring at him, blinking her eyes. Oh dear, Miss Eva thought, it is poor Brother Henry's suit that has bowled her over. And that tie—isn't it the one Mrs. Wake gave him last Christmas? Well, she did not propose to make any explanations. It was none of Mrs. Wake's business what she did with Brother Henry's things. "Do sit down. And, Joe, maybe you will get a drink for Mrs. Wake?"

When it was settled what she was to have, Miss Eva said, "Now do tell me about Mrs. Hildon. She isn't sick, is she?"

"Yes, down and can't get up, can't even move a finger without pain. But will she admit it? 'Just resting for a bit. This stupid doctor of mine says I must stay abed'—that's all she will admit to. So she can't have us over tomorrow for our regular bridge. Thank you, Joe," she added as he returned with her drink. "My, but you all look cosy and comfortable here." She settled back as if for the evening.

Miss Eva, listening to her good-natured chatter, made the right responses, at the proper time asked Joe to fill up her glass. It was while he was out of the room that Mrs. Wake said, "Joe Galland. Galland—that's his last name isn't it? Well, there is something familiar about that name. Seems to me I remember reading in the papers, one time when I was down home, a man down there near New Orleans, mixed up in some political scandal, now what was it? Oh, I'll think of it eventually; it'll come to me. Galland. It's right on the edge of my mind."

Joe had come in while she was speaking. How long had he been within hearing distance? Miss Eva wondered. Too long,

she saw as he joined them, saying, "Here you are, ma'am. Anything more for you, Miss Eva?" His voice was just the same as always, but, glancing up at him, Miss Eva saw that his face was tense and strained. "I was born in southern Indiana, Mrs. Wake," he said. "Near enough to the South to make your accent sound quite natural to me."

"Sure enough?" She regarded him with curiosity.

"Yes, ma'am. But I've been knocking about the world for a good many years since my Indiana days."

"Well, you're not knocking around any more, not for the present anyway," Miss Eva said. "You've got to see that I get my driver's licence before you even think about taking off for anywhere."

"I'm absolutely contented right here." Joe grinned across at her and stretched his feet out to the fire.

"Miss Eva, you are simply spoiling him to death," Mrs. Wake said. "I can see that with half an eye. That new car—I bet you got it just because Joe liked it."

This was too near the truth for comfort, and Miss Eva spoke of the good care Joe took of the car, then went on to talk of the weather, the only really safe topic she could think of at the moment. Mrs. Wake made her strangely self-conscious, the way she had felt at the market that morning. Why was it? she wondered, as she talked on. Was it the way Mrs. Wake's bright small eyes kept turning from her to Joe as if seeking out something though there was nothing there for her to discover? Or the way she looked around the room as if taking in the cosy intimacy of drawn curtains and fire? It was a relief when at last she set down her glass and rose. Joe saw her to the door, and when he came back he settled into his chair without a word.

"Thank heaven," Miss Eva said. "Somehow I was not in a mood for Mrs. Wake tonight."

Joe made no response till a long minute had passed. Then he spoke abruptly, harshly. "I heard what she said. It was my grandfather, but I wasn't going to tell her so."

"You don't need to tell me," Miss Eva said gently.

"But I want to, now it's come up." He poured himself a tall drink, went on. "He didn't do a thing the others didn't

do, and they left him holding the bag. I used to think I'd go back and kill them. But what's the use? It was that forty-thousand-dollar scandal." He gave her an inquiring glance and she shook her head. She had never heard of it. "He didn't get a cent of the money, I know that all right, but he was the one that got sent to the pen for ten years—which meant life for him; he was seventy-two. I was eleven when it happened but I'll never get over hating them for it." He was silent, staring gloomily at the fire.

"You mustn't hate," Miss Eva said. "No matter what, that's not right."

"A lot of things aren't right, by your standards. But, I tell you, in this world you've got to grab what you can for yourself, no matter how you do it. He didn't, that was the trouble. I'd have to do a sight of grabbing to get back what they did him out of on that deal."

Miss Eva looked across at him, worried now by both words and tone. Poor boy, one should not blame him too much. He had been so young when all this happened. Yet his attitude was all wrong. If his grandfather was convicted, whether the others escaped or not, there must have been some sort of shady transaction going on, and that was what Joe did not seem to face. He regretted only the loss of the money and the fact that his grandfather had to suffer alone. A political bribe? Well, no matter what it was, Joe had a definitely warped point of view about it. How could she set him straight?

He turned now and gave her a rueful smile. "I shouldn't be worrying you by digging up all that. Let's forget it."

"That's the best thing to do. Don't let it affect you. You are too fine to be spoiled by—by things you had nothing to do with."

"Ah, Miss Eva, you're the one that spoils me, like Mrs. Wake said. But I love it. Truly I do. And here I'm going to be away tomorrow and you won't have your bridge club to go to. I've a good mind not to go."

"Of course you must go. I'll have Clara here cleaning, you know, and I'll be busy." But how dear of him to think of that! And when they had said good night and she had gone

up to her room, she wondered if he knew that she had changed Clara's day on purpose so she would come on Joe's day off, and that she had given him a Thursday because that was the day for bridge? And abed at last, for they had sat up later than usual, she lay awake a long time thinking over Joe's life, which was now beginning to be revealed to her in all its essential parts, and she longed to help him somehow to firmer ground, to establish his principles more solidly. He must be honest. Yet what could she say without sounding preachy, and so automatically defeating her purpose? Perhaps all she could do was to keep right on being kind to him, trusting him, believing in him as much as possible.

9

THE NEXT day was a strange one for Miss Eva. Without Joe, without the usual bridge game, it stretched before her, endless, empty of event and yet filled with a new and disturbing element which she tried all morning to ignore. Clara came to clean, but she knew just what to do, needed no telling. There was nothing to distract Miss Eva from her thoughts. She wandered about the house, listened for the clocks to strike and by noon was too restless even to think about lunch. She told Clara to help herself to whatever she could find in the refrigerator, and that in itself was an indication of the profoundness of her unease, for it had always been a matter of principle with her to set out, or to prepare herself, whatever one of her household helpers was to eat. Then she got into her heavy brown coat, put on galoshes, for the ground was frozen and a few snowflakes were flying, and set out for a walk alongshore. Maybe the wind would blow the nonsense out of her head.

But there, under the grey sky, instead of blowing away, the nonsense—if that it were—took still greater possession of her, and in her mind she went over and over something that had happened earlier. It was nothing, it meant nothing, she kept telling herself all morning, thrusting it aside, refusing to face,

to analyse it. Now as she walked the narrow path her own feet had made, she could refuse no longer.

She had come downstairs soon after seven, knowing Joe wanted to get off early for town, thinking she would have his breakfast ready before he was up. But he was there before her, the coffee percolating, the eggs ready and the toast almost done. "Oh dear, why did you have to get ahead of me?" she scolded.

"High time I did a little work around this place. You've been doing entirely too much lately. I hope you don't mind——" He flapped the red-and-white-check apron at her. "I couldn't risk spilling anything on this handsome suit."

"Let's see—oh, the grey one! A good choice for town, and very nice with that blue tie. I'm so glad you can wear those suits. I hate to have anything that isn't being used." She sat down at the table by the window and let him serve her.

"And am I happy to be using them!" He heaped his own plate, took his place across from her, giving her his quick warm smile. "Now I want you to tell me what you propose to do with yourself today."

That was one of the charming things about Joe. He always thought of her, considered her, was concerned about her. It gave her a lovely warm, cherished feeling. She tried to think up something that would at least sound interesting or important—business letters to write, the cleaning to see to. But the indifference she felt for those small activities must have been apparent in her voice.

"Sounds dreadfully dull," Joe said. "Say, why don't you just come on in town with me? We'll have lunch, go to a movie, come home whenever you like."

For a moment Miss Eva was tempted. With eyes downcast, lest he see the eagerness in them, she considered it. Not that a day in town of itself offered any great excitement, but with Joe—— "We-ell," she began, and was silent while he refilled her cup. Then "No, no, thank you," she said almost brusquely. "I think I'll stay home today. Some other time, perhaps."

"Then why don't I just stay home too? I can take my day off next week when you will have your card game."

"No, no," she said again. "I won't let you do that. Truly I'll have plenty to occupy me."

"Well, if you are sure." He rose. "I'll just do up the dishes and then take off."

"Indeed you won't do the dishes. You are entirely too elegant. You will leave them for me. Or for Clara," she added, seeing he was about to protest.

He agreed to that, backed up to her like a child, to get his apron strings uptied, for he'd got them into a hard knot. Then he put on the coat he had draped carefully over the back of the little rocker. He turned round and round so she could admire the fit of the suit.

"It couldn't be better if it had been made for you," she said.

"Wait till I get the overcoat. That'll slay you." He went out whistling.

The room was utterly empty with his going, grey and colourless as the day. Joe was like sunshine, Miss Eva thought; he filled a room with a golden glow. Now she sighed and listened to the tick-tock of the clock. She wished she were going to town with him. Why hadn't she accepted his invitation? The truth was, she didn't want to go as an old lady to be looked after. If she could somehow have been made over to match him—— But she was old. She made a wry face.

"How's this?" Joe demanded, coming back, jingling the car keys in his hand.

"Very becoming," was all she said, but really she had seldom seen a more handsome figure. She envied every eye that would look after him as he drove along the highway in the new car. For he would have the top down, she was sure, in spite of the grey day. He would take pleasure in the dashing picture he made. And why not? she asked herself as she rose and went to the kitchen door with him. He was young, let him enjoy it. "Now have a good time," she said, "and come home late as you please. You won't disturb me."

He stood there by the door, looking down at her, his gaze warm and affectionate. "You are just too good to me." And when Miss Eva shook her head, smiling, unable to speak because all at once there was a lump in her throat, he dropped the keys into his pocket and with an abrupt and yet gentle

movement, cupped her face in his two hands, tilted it up and kissed her. He kissed her lightly, yet with tenderness. "Bless you, honey," he said, and then he was gone.

Miss Eva stood there leaning against the closed door, her head bowed, arms crossed on her breast as if to hold in, to press back the tumult that overwhelmed her. Control, discipline, restraint—where are you? she demanded of the empty room. What are years good for if they do not give me those things? Common sense, come back! This cannot be, I won't have it, I won't. It—it's unseemly. What am I, that I feel like this at a casual touch? What am I? I am Eva Iveson, spinster. That's what I am. Little Eva grown old, too old. I have no right to feel so. But I do, I'm not really old, deep down inside of me. There I am young, always the same, regardless of the years.

The car was on the gravel driveway. She must run to see him leave, to wave to him. Quickly she hurried through to the sitting-room, pressed close to the windowpane, her heart pounding hard, her breath coming noisily. Would he look back as he turned into the lane? He had only to turn his head, for the top was down. Yes, the car was slowing, he was standing to wave good-bye.

Miss Eva pressed her cheek close against the cold windowpane, blinking back the tears that dimmed her last view of him through the bare lilac hedge as he passed out of sight. Joe, Joe, how dear you are! she whispered. Oh, I wish I had gone with you! Why didn't I? I am just a timid old fool, afraid of being in the way. I might have had all day with you, away from here, going about with you, sitting beside you in the movies, seeing to it that you got a good dinner, not in a tearoom or a cafeteria but in one of those places that men like, Durgin Park or the Union Oyster House where Papa used to go with his business friends.

But no, no, it was better not to go. She turned from the window. Joe must have some time to himself. And what was the matter with her that she could not bear to spend the day alone when probably all the rest of her life—after this brief interval—she would be spending her days alone? Besides she did not want Joe to get tired of her. He must have some

young life of his own. And she herself must get busy at something. She must become Eva Iveson again, proper, staid, all the things she ought to be, that she must be.

Somehow then she had got through with the morning hours. But now, walking faster and faster along the narrow strip of sand that was growing more and more narrow as the tide came in, another tide, invisible and just as inevitable rose within her. She felt overwhelmed, drowned in it and all the air she could draw into her lungs seemed too little. At the end of the path where a row of stones formed a small break-water, she stopped, arms crossed on her breast as she had stood by the kitchen door after Joe had gone out. She could still feel the touch of his hands on her hair, his fingers on her cheeks; she could still feel his nearness, sense the breadth of shoulder, the length of thigh, the terrible, the wonderful youngness of his body, the warmth of his lips on hers. She gave herself over to the memory of that brief moment and, yielding to it, felt such a wildness come over her that she no longer was aware of the sand beneath her feet or the cold sweep of the wind. She seemed afloat in some new and more fearful element, neither air nor water, akin to fire that burned and burned and could not consume. Oh, God! she said at last. She stumbled across the sand, sank down on one of the rocks. What is happening to me? How can I bear this tumult, this pain? Pain? No, not that. It is pure delight, mad, wild. Why not acknowledge it, revel in it, here alone? Surely I am safe with only the sky above, the cold hard stone beneath and here under my feet the small pebbles that cannot speak, that can never tell, no more than the grey water can, lapping, lapping at the shore. Let me give myself over to this, just for a little while, she begged, looking round at stone and sand and water and sky. Just for this one moment out of all my life. Surely, surely I have a right to this much.

Bowed over, head in hands she sat, shedding the hard shell of years, letting everything go but that moment by the kitchen door. But little by little relentlessly, reality returned, no longer to be denied. If she were nineteen, or twenty-nine or even thirty-nine, there might be some sense in this. She was old, old. She lifted her head, looked out across the water to

the dark line of low wind-bent pines on the narrow dune beyond the bay. Suddenly she seemed to be looking back from that distance, seeing herself sitting here with the lane behind her, the houses, the village, people like that suspicious woman in the market, all her own real world around her. And she cringed and shrank within herself. It is ridiculous, she told herself. At my age, to be feeling like this! I am something to be laughed at, to be scorned, a figure of fun, an old woman in love with a boy young enough to be her own son. I, Eva Iveson, of all the people in the world, to have this happen! "I'm just a fool, an old fool, that's what I am," she said aloud. The sound of the words brought her to her feet, to walk back and forth, turning this way, that way, like someone trapped. What could she do? The answer came as if from another self, outside herself: Send him away. At once. On any excuse. He must go, yes, go. As long as you didn't know, didn't realize, it was all right to wake with eagerness, to hurry downstairs each morning to see him, to cherish each moment of the day, to look forward to the quiet evenings of talk and laughter by the fire. But now you know, you cannot go on.

Miss Eva stood with bowed head, accepting the verdict. Till now she had moved in innocence, not knowing. Now she had eaten of the fruit of the tree of knowledge. Oh, come, come, Eva Iveson, she scolded herself, don't be more ridiculous than necessary, no need of getting dramatic and tragic and Biblical! The simple truth is that you should have seen this before, you should have known, instead of waiting till a moment's casual physical contact got you all in a dither. Tonight when Joe comes home, tell him you're going away. Make it crisp and snappy—a letter from your niece, a visit to be made. This situation is impossible, unbearable. Too humiliating.

Yes, she could do it . . . if thine eye offend thee, and all that. But was it really necessary? She stood there considering. She must do nothing in haste, just because she was upset. Why should she let him go? Why should she have to bear the empty days, the lonely evenings? He would go anyway in the inevitable course of things, soon, soon enough, too soon. Meanwhile was it asking too much of life, of heaven, of fate, to keep him for as long as possible? She had had so little, so

bare a measure. Let him stay as long as he would. He would never know what a fool she was.

Ah, that was the solution. Relief swept through her. Of course. How silly she had been, how foolish, to go into such a panic! She laughed aloud and began walking back and forth again on the ever narrowing strip of sand, hugging herself with her folded arms. He will never dream what is locked fast inside me. Surely there, deep down within myself, is privacy, inviolate, impregnable. No one knows the secret places of another's heart. There one may be free, to dream, to feel. Within my own self I am free, and he will never know, he will never know. The words sang themselves, her spirits rose. She was like one who had struggled up a rocky mountain and was now tobogganing down the other side, faster and faster.

Yes, she knew what she was doing now. She rejoiced in this day of revelation: her pleasure would be doubled by understanding why she delighted so in doing things for Joe. Yes, the knowledge she had this morning won would double, treble her pleasure. She flung back her head and drew long deep breaths, savouring the cold clean air that swept in across the bay. Oh, life was good, life was wonderful! She would cherish her secret, keep it fast within her. And with that, she set out for home, her step light and free, her scarf blowing wild in the wind.

Even Clara, staid and noncommittal as a rule, noticed the difference in Miss Eva when she came into the kitchen on a gust of wind, closed the door and leaned against it, breathless and laughing from her tussle with the near-gale that was blowing. "Looks like it done you good to get out, ma'am," she said.

"Oh, it did, it did!" Miss Eva cried, flinging off her things, kicking her galoshes into the corner and tossing coat and scarf onto a chair. "I'm starved, too." She made herself a sandwich, poured a glass of milk and, without bothering with a tray, set out for the sitting-room.

Clara, following, after a moment, found her rocking back and forth in the platform rocker. "Brought you a napkin, ma'am," she said, holding it out to her.

"Oh, thank you. I forgot." The first time I ever ate without a tray, the first time in my life I ever had a meal without a napkin, she thought. I must be careful not to let this thing go to my head too much, but oh, what fun to hold this warm and lovely secret inside of me, even to pretend to myself that I am really as young as I feel!

She finished her sandwich and milk, rose and went to the hearth to look at herself in the mirror over the mantel. Yes, she had changed. Her eyes were bright, her cheeks had a faint flush—was it just from the wind? Her whole aspect was different. She was vital, alive, as vivid as Mama had been that day she had come in from the shore, wearing the red Shaker cloak. Perhaps, she thought as she went upstairs for her afternoon rest, perhaps it was just as well that Joe would not see her till tomorrow. The protective covering she must wear from now on was still too thin, too transparent. By tomorrow she would be secure behind it.

IO

Now was the golden time for Miss Eva, the time of inner exaltation, of high heart. Her secret, buried deep within her, burned like a bonfire. No one else could feel its warmth, no one else was aware of the leaping flame. No, Miss Eva told herself, she was safe. It was true that Joe, unobservant as he was about many things, watched her sometimes with a puzzled air, and when she caught him at it, she could not hold back the laughter that was always near the surface these days. He could never guess what had made the change in her.

One day when she had been for a walk alongshore, Joe staying home to finish scraping an old chest of drawers she had taken a notion to get into shape to give to the Congregational auction sale, she crossed the yard to the garage to see how he was getting along and found him standing idle just inside the open door watching her come toward him. She quickened her step, seeing him there, and called to him. "You

should have left your work and come with me. It was lovely down by the marsh."

He disregarded that. "You walk as if you had wings, Miss Eva."

And that was how she felt. Borne up, swept along, wild and free. No matter if that showed, she thought. Who could tell what it was that uplifted her? So she laughed and said, "I must have caught it from you—one of the first things I ever noticed about you was that little spring you give to each step."

Another time, when they were out in the car, a sunny fine day, the top down and the wind in their faces, she had passed a car on the road—for now she was getting to be a confident driver—and knowing she had done it well, knew too, without looking round, that Joe's eyes were upon her approvingly. She said nothing, though a smile played round the corners of her lips. Driving on, watching the road, she was suddenly aware that he was still looking at her, and when she gave him a quick questioning glance, found in his face the same puzzled, intent look that she had seen there before.

"You've got a colour like a young girl," he said.

"The wind and the sun," Miss Eva said.

Her three old friends noticed the difference in her and commented, each in her own way. At the end of their game one afternoon—at Mrs. Hildon's house where they went every other week now because it was so difficult for her to get about since this last bad attack—Mrs. Wake said, "I declare, Miss Eva, you look like a new person. What's got into you lately? I'd like to have the recipe. Honestly, you look ten years younger this spring. Is it vitamins or something you're taking?"

Miss Eva only smiled and shook her head. "I do feel quite well. But then," she added, "I've always been blessed with a good constitution." Thank heaven, she thought, for the habit of years which provides me with the conventional answer! What would happen, would the earth open up to swallow me, if I came right out and said the truth, boldly, cried it out aloud, "I'm in love and nobody knows it. I'm in love! Vitamins, fiddlesticks! My vitamin comes in no bottle; it is the essence of life itself"?

"It's eating three square meals a day, that's all it is," Mrs. Starling said. "Now you've got to provide that hungry young man with proper food, you get a well-balanced diet yourself for the first time in years. This eating off trays—poof!"

"It might be the laughter," Mrs. Wake said and when Miss Eva gave her a quick startled glance, she added, "I was out poking round in my crocus bed the day you stalled right in front of my house."

"Oh, yes, I remember. Joe sat there laughing at me for at least ten minutes while I struggled to make the car start in high. I know better now."

"There's nothing like a bit of young life to cheer one," Mrs. Hildon announced as she heaved herself out of her chair to reach across and press the bell that would bring her faithful Lelia with the tea tray. "I just can't wait for summer to come, and the grandchildren," she went on, drowning out Miss Eva's "Why didn't you let me do that?" She settled herself again in her chair. "And talk about eating—the finickiest one of them eats anything set before him when he gets down here. It's the sea air. That little Bucky—remember how peaked he was when he came last June? Why, before September, he——"

Miss Eva leaned back in her chair. Poor Mrs. Hildon was off now—she could talk by the hour about those grandchildren of hers. There would be no stopping her. Yet why should she be stopped? It was her one pleasure and the least anyone could do was sit and listen. Yet how meager, how far removed from any real living, was this preoccupation with a younger generation! It was as if Mrs. Hildon had given up all personal life. Miss Eva, revelling in her own secret richness, cherishing it, holding it fast, could feel only compassion for Mrs. Hildon and a new tolerance which allowed her to put in a murmur of well-simulated interest, of understanding, as she chattered on, pouring out the tea, urging sandwiches on them without ever really interrupting herself. Mrs. Starling frankly was not listening, she ate and sipped and let her gaze roam round the room, noting no doubt, Miss Eva thought, that the old wing chair had been re-covered—though what was the use when those little brats would ruin it in a minute. Miss Eva could read her mind without the slightest effort. Poor old

soul, let her be critical if she liked! That was about all she had left. Miss Eva gave her attention to Mrs. Hildon again.

"And I said to her, 'Why, darling, I can't get down on the floor with you and play leapfrog, I'm too old,' I said. And do you know what that little thing said to me?"

"You mean the curly-headed one, Sylvia? Cutest kid I ever laid eyes on," Mrs. Wake said. "What did she say?"

And the strange thing was, Miss Eva thought, looking from one to the other, Mrs. Wake really wanted to know. That was the amazing quality in Mrs. Wake. She was genuinely interested in everything and everybody. She didn't have to put on or pretend about that. And actually, it occurred to Miss Eva all at once, she hadn't seemed so pretentious and airy these last few weeks, she had seemed more like the real, the genuine person she was. Maybe that little talk they had had right after Brother Henry's will became known, had had a good effect on her.

"Yes, that's the one, Elvin's youngest. She said in the sweetest, most comforting tone, 'Why Gandy'—they all call me Gandy, you know—'Gandy, you aren't really old. You just look old!'" And Mrs. Hildon threw back her head and laughed, showing her complete partial and not caring in the least, Miss Eva was sure. "Now wasn't that smart, for a four-year-old?"

Not really old, you just look old, Miss Eva repeated in her mind, taking it in now. Good heavens, how true that was, how terribly terribly true!

"Out of the mouths of babes." Mrs. Wake chuckled. Then as if she too had taken a moment to absorb the full impact of the remark, she added, "She sure said a mouthful when she said that. It's why I can't bear to look in the glass—such a shock to see I don't look the way I feel. Though lately"—her face, so wide and good-natured, fell into almost comical lines of distress—"lately I've been feeling more like I look. That flu I had——"

But Miss Eva had ceased to listen. Did Mrs. Wake, too, feel that way about herself? Did everyone, as she grew older?

Mrs. Starling set down her teacup with a small clatter that was like the rap of a gavel, calling for attention. "Don't worry.

Just wait. The inside of you catches up with the outside eventually. Look at me. I look old, I feel old, I am old! No sense in denying the facts of life." She turned a fierce gaze from one to the other of them across the tea table. "And don't tell me any different, you're just wasting your breath. How I hate these people who are always saying in that false cheerful manner, 'Why, you're not old Mrs. Starling, you mustn't say you're eighty years old, say you're eighty years young.' Humph. I know how old I am, thank you."

"Now, now," Mrs. Hildon protested, knowing very well, Miss Eva was sure, that that last remark was aimed at her, "the best thing is just not to think about it. Forget it. Like I told little Alison—that's Mary's oldest—when she fell off a rock, I said——"

Miss Eva finished her tea rather hastily. She had to get out, away from these old women. Her sympathy, her understanding, had been stretched to the limit, and the revelation that they too were disconcerted, dismayed by age, struck too close home. For even Mrs. Starling, despite her words, by her very reiteration showed that she was just trying to prove to herself, to make herself believe what even she could not believe, all the time hoping no doubt that by speaking out she might take the curse off it, or that she would provoke someone to contradict her, overwhelm her with denials, shout her down. Oh, let me escape before I'm trapped, before I grow like them! They're all older than I—Mrs. Starling could be my grandmother—well, not quite; Mrs. Hildon is seventy, old enough to be my mother; and Mrs. Wake—heaven only knows how old she is! Me, I am young, my life is rich and full, I have real power, emotion in me still. I'm not living at second hand—or am I? She was stayed by the thought. It was an unreal life she was living, one of the imagination—no, no, she would not believe that, she would not let herself think that. What she felt was real, the most real thing she had ever known. She rose. "I'm sorry but I must run along. I just remembered I forgot to leave Clara her cheque and I can catch her if I hurry." With that she escaped to the hall, flung on her coat and dashed out the front door before Mrs. Hildon could more than make a gesture toward rising and seeing her out.

Oh, it was good to be out in the fresh air, out of that atmosphere of decay! She did not belong there. How could she all these years have thought of those three as her contemporaries? It came of being so much with Mama, of unconsciously accepting her friends as her own. But I'm different, thank heaven, Miss Eva told herself, spirits rising again as she walked quickly down the lane past Mrs. Wake's house toward her own gate. And what a liar I am! She chuckled. It was true she could just catch Clara, for there she was now coming down the drive from the kitchen door. But this wasn't even the day for her cheque. Maybe it was the rich secret inner life she was leading that made her so quick with an excuse when she wanted to get away, to get back into it.

She waved to Clara—who always had to walk to the head of the lane and wait for a friend who picked her up in a car—and then, on sudden impulse, went on down the little slope to the shore. Nowadays she cherished her hours alone; she no longer was jealous of Joe's time off, of his day in town. It was then that she could let her thoughts wander where they would. Other days when he was home she had only her nap time or her afternoon sun-bath hour, if the day was fine. At night she dreamed, and if in her dreams she found a yet greater release, if all inhibitions slipped away from her, well, she thought, it was only a dream. She was not responsible for her subconscious mind. Control was off then and let it be so—who cared, who knew?

So now, walking with quick light step along the narrow strip of sand, she let herself imagine Joe beside her. Sometimes, as now, the imaginary Joe was more real than the actuality. In her mind she spoke with him, more freely than she ever could in real life, and he answered always just as she would have him answer. There was something to be said for this dream life. Nothing could touch it, there was never anything disturbing or puzzling. All was clear and lovely and dependable. She went down to the end of the path, turned and came back, scarcely seeing the sunset gold in the sky or how the last rays gilded the lighthouse at Gurnet Point and made of the cluster of houses there a tiny fairylike scene, as unworldly, as dreamlike as the thoughts that absorbed her.

Coming into her own drive, Miss Eva was startled to see that the garage doors were closed. They were never closed while the car was out. Could Joe be home, already? He usually stayed out till midnight, or even after, now he was using the car regularly and not dependent on train or bus. Was he sick? What was wrong? She flew up the steps and into the house, flung her coat and scarf down on a chair, then stopped short and sniffed the air. Joe was in the kitchen cooking; he was all right. Such a wave of relief and pleasure swept through her that she stood there a moment with her hands pressed to her cheeks, getting hold of herself. Then, recovered, in control as she must be always, she was seized by yet another impulse—to a small duplicity: she would pretend she did not know he was here. So, quietly, she hung up her things in the closet under the stairs; then, humming softly to herself, she went through dining-room and pantry, and only when she was all the way into the kitchen did she give a little start, crying, "Oh, you're home!"

Joe, in his shirt sleeves, an apron tied round his waist to protect Brother Henry's dark-grey trousers, faced her, a long kitchen spoon in one hand, the slow indulgent smile that was one of his charms spreading over his face. "I just couldn't stay away today." He waved the spoon toward the big pot on the fire. "I'm starting us some split-pea soup to use up the ham bone."

"Good, good, I'm delighted to hear it!" But what delighted her was his coming home, his not being able to stay away, and she could not let that pass without a word. "This calls for a special celebration."

"Right you are, ma'am, and if you'll go put a match to the fire in the library—it's all laid, I saw to that before I left this morning—I'll be in with a bit of celebration in just half a shake."

"Splendid!" Miss Eva agreed. If he had not come early she wouldn't have lighted the fire he had made ready for her, she would have gone straight up to her room. She could not bear to sit there in the library alone of an evening. But now, with Joe home, everything was changed. This was to be an extra evening, one just handed to her out of the blue and so all the

more to be treasured. She went on to the library and started the fire and sat down in the big chair to wait for him. It was not until he had brought in their drinks and had settled himself with a sigh of content across the hearth from her, that she allowed herself to say, "So you got homesick and had to come back."

He gave her a long slow look over the top of his glass. "I don't know what hit me, but along about mid-afternoon I just got fed up with everything. I said what's the use of bumming around town when I don't want to. So I headed home."

Home, he had said. Miss Eva kept her eyes on the fire so he would not see the delight that leaped up within her, that throbbed in her throat, that made her breath quicken. After a moment, scarcely daring, yet given courage to put the test, she said in as careless a tone as she could command that she believed he really liked it here, adding, "You'll like it even better in the summer when there's swimming and the hot sand to lie on." But now the words were out, the test offered, the long unspoken question asked, such a trembling came over her that she set down her glass lest he see. Was he going to say, "Oh, but I'll be gone before summer," or "I'd like that, if I was only going to be here that long"? For the three months—two or three, Mr. Whitman had said—would be up in a few days, at the end of March. She waited, barely breathing, all her life poised, hanging fire.

Joe took another long drink, rattled the ice in his glass. "I'm not much on swimming in ice water but I reckon it's not so cold here in the bay as it is out at the big beach."

Miss Eva let her breath out in a long sigh of relief. "Oh, it's much warmer here. You just have to watch the tides and go out when there's more than mud flats to swim in." She took up her glass now, held it in both hands, her head resting on the high back of the big leather chair, her eyes on the fire. He was going to stay, he had no thought of leaving. He took it so for granted that he was to stay as long as he liked that he did not realize how he had committed himself by that casual remark about the coldness of the water. Or did he? There were times lately when he had seemed almost to read her thoughts, to sense what was beneath the surface, as if the

invisible delicate feelers of the spirit could vibrate to a sound that was never made. But no, no, what nonsense, that was impossible. Not Joe. It was true he was often quick to catch her thought, about some perfectly commonplace thing, it was true he knew when she was a bit depressed, when she was more than usually gay, and he responded always to her mood. But it was only his natural sympathy for any human being that accounted for that. Look how he had hit it off with Mrs. Starling.

So she relaxed, gave herself up to the pleasure of his companionship, enjoyed during dinner the account Joe gave her of his dull day in town, and afterward took pleasure in reading aloud one of Brother Henry's hair-raising books.

Ah, it had been a lovely evening, she thought, as she went up to bed! And Joe had liked it too. He had been homesick, he had come home so they could have such an evening. Beyond that she did not think. She did not wonder how long the subconscious may remain submerged, or the secret dream. She did not know that the most dangerous thing in the world is a dream.

II

It was the last day of March and Miss Eva's birthday. She hoped no one would remind her of it. Mrs. Hildon knew the day but she had been so forgetful lately that there was a good chance she would not remember. Because it was a Sunday, Miss Eva took a notion to go to church. She often went on anniversaries. Besides, this was a very special birthday, one she had long dreaded, her fiftieth. Half a century. It was appalling, really. And all the churchgoing in the world would not change it any more than a man by taking thought could add a cubit to his stature. Of course, she thought as she was dressing, Joshua had made the sun stand still. But that would not be enough for her, her sun had risen too high. Turning time backward as one might turn a clock's hands—that was the only thing that would do her any good, and all the psalm-singing and praying could not bring that about.

When she came downstairs in her best black coat with the astrakhan collar that matched her muff, a neat black hat set straight across her forehead, she found Joe sprawled out on the living-room couch, reading the Sunday funnies and listening to a jazz concert on the radio.

"Where in the world are you bound for, Miss Eva?" he shouted above the noise. Then, sitting up, he turned down the radio. "Church, did you say? Well, I'll drive you over. Just don't ask me to go in—I got enough churchgoing when I was at that mission school, enough to last me the rest of my natural life."

But Miss Eva would not let him take her. Somehow it did not seem right to be driven to the church door in her new dashing convertible, it was not seemly. "I want to walk, thank you, Joe. I need the exercise and it really isn't far. A nice day too, for March."

And she enjoyed both walk and service. The minister had welcomed her—was it the size of her yearly contribution that gave him that small air of deference? Many of her acquaintances had greeted her cordially, and several ladies went out of their way to thank her for the chest she had given for the auction sale—it had brought a good sum. Altogether Miss Eva was glad to be reassured that she had a real place in the community, even though she took little part in its activities. She had needed that reassurance, she thought now as she walked homeward under the tall bare elms through which the sun shone down warmly on her. She had been living in so vivid a dream world that it was good for her to make contact with the realities of the community around her. Ballast—that was what she needed, and that was what this morning at church had given her, something to counterbalance the power of her imagination. Was she allowing it to sweep her too far? Was it more powerful than she had realized? Turning into the lane, she wondered if it might take complete possession of one. No, no, that was impossible. At least as long as Joe knew nothing of her feeling for him. But did he still know nothing? What about those oddly penetrating looks he had given her sometimes lately? Oh, she was just self-conscious, that was all! She shrugged it off. Her secret

was safe, buried deep within her. Her foolish, mad, secret love.

Smiling to herself, not noticing just where she went along the side of the lane, she ran into a stray branch and had to stop to disentangle it from the little veil that covered her hat. Then it was that she saw the shadbush had begun to bud. A few more mild days with this warm sunshine and the tiny blossoms would be out. Spring was really coming. She broke off some branches to take home with her. They would open in the house. And over there, in that low spot, could that be a skunk cabbage, up already? She scrambled through the bushes to see. Yes, there it was, a bold bright-green thrust of leaves. She gathered them together, broke them off. She would have a springlike arrangement for the kitchen table.

Joe was at the stove, stirring something in the double boiler, the table strewn with the wreckage of his cooking—boxes of seasoning, bowls, egg-beater. "My, it looks as if you're making something extra special today!" Miss Eva said as she went to the far cupboard for the low pottery vase she would use for her flower arrangement.

"Had to do something to amuse myself while you were gone. If you will go off and leave me," he grumbled, "you'll just have to take the consequences. Whew, what a smell!"

"It's only skunk cabbage. Wait till I run some water over the stems, it won't be so bad then." Miss Eva laughed. "I just couldn't resist the brave little things, venturing out so early in the cold." She washed the stems, made her arrangement, set the bowl on the kitchen table and stood off to get the effect. "There, how's that? Really festive, isn't it now?"

Joe came to look, spoon in hand. "Not bad, not bad at all." Then, leaning toward her, wrinkling up his nose to sniff, he said, "You smell nice, even if your old bouquet doesn't."

"Oh?" Miss Eva looked up at him in surprise, then remembered. When she was sitting at her dressing-table putting on her hat, she had on sudden impulse taken up the little bottle of perfume that had stood there unused for years and put a drop behind each ear. It was some she had brought home from Paris, her last trip so long, long ago. But the

fragrance had lasted. "You've a keen nose. All I can smell is whatever you're cooking in the oven."

That was all that was said between them. Yet when, smiling, casual really, and quite at ease, she looked up at him, she found something in his eyes fixed intently on her that seemed to turn the world upside down, so that she stood there, rooted, incapable of movement or speech. He too did not move. Was it long they stood there so? Miss Eva did not know. It might have been but the briefest moment, it might have been forever before she was able to say, "I—I must go and change now," and so escape.

She stumbled going up the stairs, clung to the rail a moment to steady herself, went on. In her own room she sank down on the low stool before the dressing-table and searched her face. There was nothing there to give her away, only her eyes seemed larger and darker than usual, her cheeks pale. I did nothing, she told herself, I said nothing, I even, for once, thought nothing! And yet he looked at me like that—as if—as if I were a woman. . . . But I am a woman! Oh—— With a groan she hid her face in her hands. Was she going mad, was she going clean out of her mind?

After a while she rose, took off her church clothes and put on a dull grey wool, leaving off the soft rose scarf she usually wore with it. Let him see her plain and old as she was, she told herself fiercely, let him know—if for a second he had thought otherwise—that she was old, old, old, and today, at this moment, fully ten years older than yesterday. Yes, there was no denying the great, the terrible space of time between forty-nine and fifty. Not just one year, as the calendar said, but ten or more. But why, why—she sprang up and began walking back and forth across the floor, striking one fist against the palm of the other hand—why was I not born twenty years later, or even fifteen? She looked again at herself in the glass. In this dull grey garment, she was as drab and plain as one ought to be at fifty. She turned away and went to the door, stood there with one hand on the knob, gathering courage. She must not let him know that she had seen that look he gave her. She must not let him suspect that the sensitive feelers of her spirit had caught some change in

him. Bracing herself then, stiffening her spine, she went down to Sunday dinner.

It was a quiet meal. Miss Eva gave an account of her journey to church, she spoke of how the chest of drawers Joe had worked on had been praised by the ladies of the Guild, she talked on and on in what she hoped was a sprightly way, but every word she spoke sounded to her own ears forced and unnatural. A sense of tension seemed gradually to build up, fill the room, to strike against the walls and fall back on her, heavy, overpowering. She praised the sauce that Joe had made for the broccoli, she exclaimed over the apple tarts he had baked. Then, "Maybe I'm a bit tired," she said abruptly, rising. "I'll leave you with everything to do, if you don't mind, Joe."

"Sure, go ahead." He turned his eyes full upon her then for almost the first time during dinner. "You do look a bit peaked—this church business just ain't natural. And while you're about it, better change your shoes. You must have waded in a bit of bog picking this sweet-smelling posy here."

It was the first thing he had said that sounded like himself. She smiled. "I don't know what I'd do without you to look after me, Joe."

"Somebody's got to do it," he said and grinned his wide boyish sweet grin. "By the way, do you mind if I use the car a bit while you're napping?"

"Of course I don't mind. As long as you like," she said and went upstairs, infinitely relieved. Her imagination had been playing her tricks, that was all. But she was tired, and her feet—she hadn't noticed, but they were cold and wet. She kicked off her shoes, peeled out of her stockings and found in a corner of one drawer an old pair of woollen bedsocks. There were holes in the toes, but they felt cosy and warm. Now for a rest. Should she—yes, she would take a sun bath. With the sun streaming in, it was far warmer in the octagonal sun room than in her own room, and it might be that lying there, stripped and bare—naked came ye into this world, the minister had read this morning—it might be that somehow the sun and the sky and the sound of waves alongshore would restore her completely to herself. If they didn't, sleep would. She

would like to sleep the rest of the day away. If there was anything she hated, it was birthdays. Yet it was not the birthday that had exhausted her, she knew that all too well. It was this constant shifting in her own mind from denial to acknowledgment; it was this war between what reason told her and what every instinct she possessed cried aloud.

Worn out, she dozed, heard dimly the sound of the car going out, and slept at last. When she awoke, it was all at once and to alarm, to a sense of being no longer alone in her sunny retreat, to a feeling of eyes upon her. And me with holes in my socks, was her first startled thought. After that came the realization of her nakedness. She snatched up the blue flannel bathrobe she always brought out with her, flung it around her and sprang to her feet.

The sun room was empty, so was her own room. The whole house was empty. When Joe took the car of a Sunday afternoon, as he did now and then, he never came home till dark. How silly of her, to fall into such a panic, how ridiculous! She chuckled to herself. Think of it, her first thought had been of the holes in her socks and not of the fact that she hadn't a stitch on! My New England training, she told herself, as she came through the door to her own room. It was not until she was halfway across to the closet to get her clothes that she saw the roses, a dozen, deep-red, long-stemmed roses rammed stiffly as a man might place them into a tall pottery vase. Miss Eva stood staring at them, there on the small table just inside the door. How in the world had they come there? Who—Joe? She ran to the window. Yes, the garage door was closed, he was back. Then she saw that her own door to the hall was slightly ajar. Joe, of course. He had brought them up, set them there to surprise her. That must have been what had awakened her with such a start. But why? How could he know about her birthday? Did he know everything? She went over to them, bent and breathed in their fragrance. How lovely! No one had ever before sent her red roses. Tears came into her eyes and she blinked them away furiously. I'm just an old fool. But he found out somehow, he went out and got them for me, for me. O God, why am I such a fool? It means nothing, it is just something that happened, means

nothing at all. But it does, oh, it does. And how dear of him, to go out and spend his own money on me when he has so little, when he has had so little all his life! She turned away. No need to get so emotional about it. She'd have a bath, get dressed and go down and thank him.

Joe was in great spirits when she came down, the vase of roses in her hand. She wanted to get a cut-glass vase for them, something that would let them spread out a bit and show off to greater advantage. He was as pleased as a child over having got ahead of her, caught up with her, as he said. "You might as well give up," he told her. "You can't keep anything from me."

"No?" Miss Eva smiled, busy arranging the roses. There were some things he would never find out. Of that she was resolved. "But tell me, how did you know?"

"A little bird." He stood there by the kitchen table, arms folded, eyes twinkling.

"Not the old bird." That was what he called Mrs. Starling—the old bird. "She doesn't know my birthday from Adam's."

Joe shook his head.

"Well, I'll find out, somehow, how you discovered it."

"But meanwhile, now I know about it, we'd better have a celebration."

"Champagne," she cried, falling in with his mood. "In the pantry, down below the jelly shelf. And not too much supper, after that big meal this noon. I'll make an omelette." She opened the refrigerator. "Ah, now I know!" There on the shelf was an angel cake with a single candle. "Mrs. Hildon! Her Lelia's speciality is angel cake and she's done this before. So you're not such a magician after all."

The gaiety lasted through champagne, through supper. But when Joe came into the library again after cleaning up in the kitchen, their usual nightcaps on a tray, a small thing happened that changed everything. Miss Eva, waiting for him to return, had happened to look up at the portraits. How strange, she thought, that all of her birthday had gone by and she had not once until this moment thought of Mama! To tell the truth, she had not thought of her for days. Such a thing had never happened before. While she was puzzling over that,

she noticed that Papa's portrait had slipped over a bit so that it hung crooked. If there was anything Miss Eva could not abide it was a picture that was not straight. She was up in a second, mounted on the needle-point footstool, shoes kicked off so she would do it no harm. She stood on tiptoe and reached up to straighten the portrait. It was just then that Joe came in.

He was across the room in an instant, the tray clattering down as he dropped it on the table. "Miss Eva! That's dangerous!"

Whether it was his sudden cry or the rattle of the glasses that startled her, or both, Miss Eva did not know, but she teetered, lost her balance, the footstool flew out from under her and Joe caught her in his arms. But he did not put her down, he did not let her go, he just stood there holding her close and after a moment began to scold her. "What do you mean, doing such a thing! You might have broken every bone in your body! Can't I turn my back for a minute without your trying to kill yourself? You are the world's most outrageous woman and I don't know what I put up with you for, scaring the living daylights out of me like this."

Miss Eva lost track of his words, she lost track of time and eternity as well, she could only feel his cheek pressed against hers, his breath warm at her ear, the tightness of his arms around her, the whole length of his beautiful firm young body—shoulder, breast and thigh—close against her. Then slowly, like someone coming up from deep under water, half drowned, gasping, she lifted her arms, pushed him gently from her and dropped down in her chair. "I—I was all right till you yelled at me," she said, making shaky laughter out of her uncertain breathing.

Joe stood looking down at her for a long moment in which she had not the courage to meet his eyes. "You need a drink. And no thanks to you that the whole trayload didn't smash to bits. Here, take this."

"There's plenty more out there—if it ha-had smashed."

"Ah, but not like this. I found it in with the champagne—Scotch, and prewar stuff at that." He lifted his glass. "To you, my dear. Many happy returns!"

Miss Eva raised her glass, looked up and forgot to drink. She was drowning still, drowning in eyes that were fixed on her, bold, hypnotically intent. She broke away with an effort. "Thank you." It was only a whisper, as she put her glass to her lips.

Joe sat down across from her and stared into the fire. After a little he said, "Cigarette?"

"Thank you." And when he had given it to her, lighted it and sat down again, she glanced across at him just once, caught the flicker of a faint smile at the corner of his lips—or was it just a shadow cast by the firelight?

He sipped his drink and said, not looking round, "We'll just take it easy for a bit."

What did he mean? What did he mean? As if later, perhaps, they would not take it so easy? She leaned back, tried to relax, tried to assume an air of tranquillity and commonplace quietness, which she did not feel. She was taut as a stretched wire, a telephone wire humming with a confusion of strange and incredible messages. The silence between them grew more and more oppressive, she was smothered by it, unable to breathe. She sat up and looked around desperately seeking some sort of relief, Joe all the while just sitting there across from her, sipping his drink, his eyes on the fire, as if this were any ordinary evening.

Well, maybe it was—no, no, she could fool herself no longer. But she made one last effort, seeing, face down on the table, the book she had been reading aloud to Joe the night before. She took it up and studied the page—she could not seem to remember what it was about. But no matter. "Let's see, where did we leave off last night?" And when Joe made no answer, she began at random. The words made no sense to her but, somehow, her voice went on and on automatically, making sounds without meaning. A half hour perhaps went by. Joe refilled her glass and now and then she paused to take a sip. Yet each time it was more difficult; she faltered, struggled on. She skipped a line occasionally, knowing too late that she had done so, her voice sounded like someone else's, far off, out of her control, a phonograph going on forever.

At last Joe, without a word, reached over, took the book

from her hand and tossed it on the table. "Enough, enough," he said. And now the tension mounted between them. It became unbearable. Miss Eva rose. "I—I think I'll go up," she faltered.

Joe made no response. He did not even look up till she was at the door. "You forgot your shoes." There was a faintly teasing note in his tone.

As if he knew what a turmoil she was in! Miss Eva stiffened, she drew herself up—after one astounded glance that proved to her that she actually was in her stockinged feet, had been ever since she had balanced precariously on the footstool. "No matter," she said with fierceness. Then without so much as a good night, she was through the door. There was such a pounding in her ears that she could not be sure, she never would be sure, but she thought she heard a faint chuckle from Joe and—what did he say as he closed the door, the click of the latch breaking in upon his words? "I'll bring them?" Was that what he said?

In her own room she did not even put on the light but undressed in the dark with trembling fingers. She was mad, she was out of her head, she told herself. She simply did not know what she was doing. Yet automatically, out of the habit of years, she went through the usual process of getting ready for bed. Then she went to the window where the curtains were still open. It was a dark night, the sky overcast, and no wind blowing. Against the black sky and water she could make out the yet blacker outline of the hedge, the low bushes, the hornbeam tree and, far off, Gurnet Light blinking, casting for a moment its long reflection across the black water. The world was still there, all there just as it had always been. Only she was different.

The tide was coming in, she could hear it. And now looking off alongshore toward the marsh, she saw something she had seldom seen. A wave broke, and where it struck the shore, light flashed and ran and disappeared, and came again. Another wave, larger than before, and the white fire of phosphorescence leaped along the shore. The bay was a kettle, a cauldron with a black lid on it, and the molten silver it held was breaking free around the rim, leaping, bubbling, sub-

siding to leap again. If only a great hand could come down from the sky and bear down on that cover, hold it fast so the fire would be driven deep beneath the surface, no matter if it ate the heart out of the world! But there was no strength outside one's self, Miss Eva thought.

She stood looking for a long time, cold hands pressed against her burning cheeks. There was no power to help. The world? Yes, the world was still there, she told herself again. Mrs. Starling's cottage was not quite visible, only a bit of her bare lilac hedge could be seen, but it was there, like a monument and a reminder of restraint, of respectability, of propriety and all the old standards. Miss Eva looked back at the strange light that ran alongshore, and it seemed to her now more than ever that it was something evil and fearsome breaking through, uncontrolled, consuming, and it was she alone who must put the lid on tighter, press it down, put out the white fire, the beautiful, terrible white fire. She stumbled across the room, fumbled for the latch, turned the key. Then, her breath catching short and hard, she threw herself down across the bed.

Time passed slowly as she lay there, tense, wide-awake and, in spite of herself, listening with every nerve in her body. There was no sound from below, no creak of a step on the stair, no footsteps in the hall, no hand on her doorknob. Perhaps there would not be. Perhaps—— She clutched at the pillow, buried her face in it, beat it with clenched hands.

The clocks struck, one quickly on the heels of the other, one taking it up as the other ceased, adding time to time, making of the hour something strange and unnatural, something beyond all reckoning, beyond all reason, beyond all responsibility. The long minutes passed. Miss Eva lay on her back now, staring up into the dark. Slowly a sense of fatality, of doom stole over her. It was a dying and yet a resurrection too, a coming alive again. For a while, as a drowning man is supposed to do, she looked back over all her life. She went the drowning man one better, for she looked ahead and saw her life as it was laid out before her. A great clarity seemed to have come upon her. She saw not only her own life but Mama's, Papa's, Brother Henry's.

The clocks struck twelve, together now, as she had never heard them before. It was like a sign, a signal, a call to action. Quite deliberately she rose, went to her dressing-table, fumbled about in the dark till she found the small bottle of perfume, and when she had used it, she moved like one in a dream, sure-footed, not striking against chair or table, to the door. Noiselessly she turned the key. She waited a long moment, one hand on the knob. Then she turned that too, and came back to bed, leaving the door ajar.

12

It was a strange new life which Miss Eva entered upon now, with spring coming on, a rosy-brown haze on the thickets, shadbush gone by, tawny gold buds on the oaks, the maples blood-red and the white birch trees sprinkled with new leaves like a fall of pale-green snow. It was a double life, the two parts separate, each one denying the other.

That first morning after her birthday, she had wakened to panic. Was everything ruined now?—that was the one question which formed itself out of the turmoil of her emotions. Could her lovely, quiet life with Joe continue as it had been? What would happen next? But when, having put on an outward calm, thankful for the years of selfdiscipline which made it possible, she went down late to breakfast, she found Joe exactly as he had always been. A shade gayer, perhaps, and more relaxed, possibly a bit more teasing in his manner. Though he had always teased her, about her little economies, her air of dignity, her small reserves. Gradually as the days went by, she was eased of apprehension. What was not spoken remained a thing apart, bread eaten in secret. Stolen waters—there was more to that verse, but Miss Eva would not let herself remember. The sweetness thereof—that was enough for her.

She savoured it even at the bridge club, when with downcast eyes, the picture of a shocked maiden lady, she listened to Mrs. Hildon's annual tale about her faithful Lelia. For the

first of June every year Lelia left for a three-months' vacation, ostensibly to avoid the grandchildren and the other extra help Mrs. Hildon was obliged to bring in for the summer. "Of course I shouldn't speak of such a thing before you, Miss Eva, but everybody knows it's that retired garbage collector she goes off to Maine with," Mrs. Hildon said. "Indecent, I call it," was Mrs. Starling's comment. And Mrs. Wake, this year more outspoken than usual, said, "Well, if that scrawny, middle-aged old gal can get away with it, more power to her. If you'll excuse me for saying such a thing."

Miss Eva ordinarily would have resented Mrs. Hildon's apologetic glance, would have bristled with indignation at the way married women put on such an air of superior knowledge. It was one of the small annoyances one who had never married was obliged to put up with. But this time, giving no sign, making no comment, she was filled with such overwhelming, such wicked glee, that it was all she could do to keep from shouting, "You needn't be so careful of me!"

Yet increasingly as summer approached, that sense of triumph, of exaltation lost its importance to her. She hungered more and more for some further reassurance, for some promise of permanence. The evenings were getting too mild now for a fire in the library and somehow it was not the same, not half so cosy and shut-off from the world, to be in the sitting-room as they often were now in the evenings. There was a dispersal, a thinning down of the old intimacy. And looking ahead to the hot summer, Miss Eva thought with quite unreasonable dread of the time when they would be driven out to the octagonal summer room. She delayed and delayed having the screens put up there and was inwardly furious when Mrs. Starling reminded her that until now she had invariably put them up the fifteenth of May. "I always know the date by the sound of old Lonzo hammering the screens in," she said.

"Oh, I like to make a little variation in things now and then," Miss Eva had responded. "It doesn't do to get too fixed and settled."

"It's good to be settled, if it is in the right way," Mrs. Starling announced with decision.

Miss Eva gave her a startled glance. Why did she say that? What was she hinting at? What had she seen with her bright hawk's eye? But she only said with her usual composure, "Old Lonzo is getting too rheumatic to handle those big screens alone. I'll get Joe to help him some day soon."

"That Joe, how you do spoil him! Oh, he has his points, I admit, but even I can see that he takes advantage of you more and more every day."

Miss Eva did not dare deny it. It was true: Joe did less and less. Except for an occasional breakfast, he seldom got a meal now. But she didn't care, she took pleasure in doing for him and he knew it. That was why he let her. In any case it was none of Mrs. Starling's affair, was it? So she turned the subject and avoided any further discussion of Joe.

Yet that was the beginning of a faint new uneasiness. At bridge when she found herself quoting him—about the political situation, about the weather, about anything at all—she caught herself up and spoke quickly of something else. She had grown self-conscious about him. The awkwardness increased after she happened one day to catch an exchange of glances between Mrs. Wake and Mrs. Hildon, and after she had thought over Mrs. Hildon's long tale about a friend of hers who came so completely under the domination of her second maid that the family really had to take steps about it. "Why, she'd have given that girl everything she had if her sister hadn't come to visit and put a stop to what was going on—jewellery, money, everything! A thoroughly unscrupulous girl, something sinister about her, even I could see."

Miss Eva made no comment, but she was absent-minded the rest of that afternoon and lost the rubber out of sheer inattention. It wasn't like that with her and Joe, she kept telling herself. Mrs. Hildon couldn't have been suggesting such a thing. Why, it was Joe who gave everything to her—life, youth, happiness. Of course she paid him well, gave him extras from time to time, and—well, yes, it was an easy life he had there with her, every comfort, the use of the car whenever he wanted it. But why not? Why not? Why shouldn't she give him everything she had, if she took the notion? The poor boy had had so little in his life. It was time someone

made up to him for the hard times he had been through. She was fiercely defensive about him, arguing back and forth in her mind. But she would have to be careful, not talk about him so much as she had got into the way of doing. That was just pure self-indulgence, because it gave her pleasure just to speak his name.

If only she could be sure that things would go on forever as they were. That was the thought that haunted and tormented her more and more, made her seize on and treasure every small thing Joe might say—like “Next winter we’d better have new storm windows on the north side. You’ve let the frames go too long without repainting,” or even his suggestion that Lonzo plant okra in the garden. He loved it in soup, he said, and they could put some up and have it all year. Those small straws in the wind were a comfort to her as she began to have more and more need of comfort.

There were times when she begrudged Joe his day off, when she longed to know, beyond his offhand, vague account, how he spent the day, what he did in Boston, if he really went there. So one bright May morning during the time when Mrs. Wake was off at the races—“My one indulgence, you know,” she had said—and the bridge club did not meet, Miss Eva was out of all proportion delighted and reassured when Joe said at breakfast, “How about taking the old bus and going off for the day? Just you and me? Boston’s got nothing to offer on a fine morning like this.”

“A wonderful idea!” Miss Eva cried. “We’ll take a picnic basket, go down to Barnstable maybe and sit on the dunes.”

But when she went to the refrigerator she found it too bare, especially with Clara coming and having to be fed at noon. “Oh, well, it would delay us too much to have to go to market. I’ll put in an order for tonight and we’ll get right off early, have a good long morning and go somewhere to eat.” She didn’t want anything to interfere or even postpone for a minute this little excursion. It was Joe’s idea and she treasured the thought that he had suggested it, had wanted his whole day off with her.

It was a day to have the top down and be free to the wind’s blowing and the sun’s shining. But when they got in the car

and Joe reached out to touch the button that would roll the top down, Miss Eva stopped him. "No, leave it up." And when he looked round in surprise, she said, "Just for a bit, till we get out on the highway."

Going up the lane, Joe chuckled. "I get you. The old bird might think you too sporting in that new blue scarf and all."

"Well, maybe," she confessed. But that wasn't the whole of it. She just didn't want Mrs. Starling or anybody else seeing them leave together with a holiday spirit upon them. She didn't want the world intruding, she did not want that vague uneasiness she had felt of late, to tarnish for a moment this lovely day. "Only this isn't a new scarf," she went on. "It's old as the hills. I got it at Liberty's ages ago." A lifetime ago, Joe's lifetime, literally. Joe was not even born then. The thought gave her a sudden chill, as if a cloud had come across the sun. It was not till they had passed Plymouth, the top down now and the blue scarf tied round her head, that Miss Eva began to feel right again. Now they were safe, free, off on their own, apart from all the world. Peace spread through her, her spirit lifted. This was a time to savour, to prolong. No need of talk, no need of anything but to be, to breathe in the fresh mild air, to let the eye rest on the sweep of blue water, on the delicately green fields and hills. Miss Eva leaned back against the red leather seat and gave herself up to pleasure of the moment.

The canal was a brilliant royal blue. A few downy white clouds moved lazily overhead. It seemed no time at all till Joe was turning off the main highway on to a narrow side road. Miss Eva wondered that he was so sure of the way, but did not bother to ask. This was a time to accept everything good that came along, without question, without doubt.

"I'm afraid we'll have to walk from here," Joe said, pulling up where the road petered out into a sandy track leading toward the dunes. "I'll bring the steamer rug."

"I don't mind a little walk. Do me good. We haven't been exercising on the big beach so much since the weather turned warm." There were more people there now—that was the real reason. But she put that thought quickly from her. They had this wild picturesque stretch all to themselves today.

Just over the crest of the dunes, Miss Eva dug herself a small level spot and sat down on the rug that Joe spread for her. Here was the wide open sea with whitecaps breaking, quick and gay as the turn of a seagull's wing, with the rollers crashing below them, flinging the spray high. Joe had dropped down at her feet, stretched out, head resting on his hand. "Pretty nice, isn't it?" he said.

Elbows on knees, chin in hand, Miss Eva's eyes went over his graceful length, there at her feet, and such a wave of tenderness went through her that a mist came over her eyes. Here in the warm sun with the sea before them, the world fell away, they were the only two human beings left. Free, together. Oh, if it could always be like this!

Joe, as if sensing her unspoken thoughts, turned his head, looked up at her through half-closed eyes. "Like it?"

She could only nod, smiling down at him.

He sat up, shook the sand from his shoulders, clasped his hands around his knees and rocked back and forth. "The sea always gives you that contented look. Me," he added, motionless now, his eyes on the far horizon, "it makes me restless."

The words went through her, sharp as pain. "Travel?" she ventured.

"Um-mm."

"Wh-where would you like best to go?" Miss Eva asked through stiff lips.

"Oh, not Europe, or the Pacific—I've had enough of them—Mexico maybe, or South America."

"I've never been there." And after a moment she added, "It would be a different world to me down there. Maybe a better one—with no associations, all fresh and new."

Joe gave her a quick glance and looked away again. "Well?"

"Well, what?" she asked with a smile, but her heart all at once began to pound hard and fast. A flood of impossible possibilities flashed through her mind—could he, did he mean that he would like to go—with her? He couldn't well go alone, he hadn't the means, one small scrap of her native common-sense reminded her. But she thrust that thought aside. She had money—

"How about it then?" His tone was light, casual. He did not even look around.

Miss Eva pressed cold finger tips against her temples, trying to still the mad beating there. He meant it, he did, he did! He wanted to go with her. Away, away from all her old life, her neighbours, her world, away where she would feel no qualms of uneasiness, where none could question, none could look askance . . . palm trees, moonlight, guitars strumming . . .

Joe, as if he had caught her thought, was humming to himself, "Trum, turumpta, trum tarumpta," a gay rumba tune, swaying back and forth keeping time to an imaginary guitar.

A wildness came over Miss Eva, a pounding of the blood, a reckless, devil-may-care madness. She hummed along with him, broke into laughter. But "Stranger things have happened" was all she dared say. She would not let herself think of the practical details, how to get away, how they would manage, registering at hotels, chance meetings with people who might know, guess—no, no, she would not think of all that—or of this front tooth of hers that lately had felt sensitive, that might need attention, have to come out in some strange place where there was no good dentist, leaving a horrible gap; she would not think now of the pipes freezing at home, the snow unswept from the side piazza—no, no, she thrust all those unwelcome thoughts fiercely aside. She would be away, free. With Joe. No one else. And in her fancy she was no longer Miss Eva Iverson, the staid, the conventional, the proper New Englander; she was little Eva, young Eva, with all life before her, dancing in a soft flowing gown, her feet as light as milkweed down, a lotus blossom in her hair. And Joe—what was he thinking, sitting there at her feet, a small smile on his lips, his eyes on the far horizon? Was he dreaming, too?

As if he felt her inquiring gaze, he said, softly, almost as if thinking aloud, "Wintertime is the best. Drive down as far as Mexico City, ship the car from there . . . one of those luxury liners . . ."

His words came as if from a great distance, yet real, confirming, assuring and reassuring, something to hang on to in

the midst of this mad whirling of her senses. After a while Joe too fell silent. The tide was going out, there were three lines of breaking surf, and swift green shadows where the waves hung high. The sun shone down, bright and blinding. Gradually Miss Eva began to find it too dazzling to her eyes, the rays too fierce on her head. She wished she had worn a hat, instead of this silly scarf. She began to feel the hardness of the sand beneath her. Then all at once she was gratefully aware of Joe's glance at his watch.

"Say, it's high time we were getting something to eat, do you know it? I'm starving." He sprang up, gave her a hand.

Miss Eva rose stiffly. She'd been too long in one position, the sun had made her dizzy. But she would not admit it, not even when Joe looked at her with concern and asked if she was all right. "I'm fine," she assured him. "Never better."

"You're a good sport, honey. Nobody like you," he said, giving her a little pat on the shoulder as she started ahead of him down from the crest of the dune.

At once weariness fell from her, she didn't mind the sun or the aching muscles. It wasn't often, in broad daylight, that he called her by one of those endearing terms—honey, sugar, little one. And now—a good sport? Was it because she didn't complain of the heat which seemed multiplied a hundredfold now they were out of the sea breeze, cut off from it by the dunes, or was it because of the way she had taken his plan for next winter? In either case she treasured his word of approval, and as they reached the car and he opened the door for her, she said, "It's been a lovely morning, off here, by ourselves. Out of the world——"

"One of many to come," said Joe, and helped her in. "But the question now is," he went on, coming round and settling himself behind the wheel, "where do you want to eat? There's a place a few miles down somebody was telling me about——"

He went on to describe it, he'd forgotten the name, thought he could find it, but Miss Eva was not listening. Someone had told him. Who? That simple phrase somehow brought the world back around her. Whom had he talked with about eating places? Oh, don't be a fool, Eva Iveson, she told herself. Why shouldn't he talk to someone, anyone, about eating

places? He went to market without her nowadays, and, friendly as a puppy, he would fall into talk with anyone who gave him the least encouragement. Or maybe in Boston, or even the garage where he took the car regularly to be filled, greased or oiled—it was always needing something done to it. "That sounds very nice," she said, when she realized he was waiting for some response from her.

It wasn't a place she would have chosen, Miss Eva thought a little later. It was rather new, a sort of roadhouse, she supposed, not the least New England in atmosphere, like the 1812 House or the Blacksmith Shop or even the inn at home. But it looked clean and it was well-filled, usually a good sign. Miss Eva looked with faint disapproval at the artificial flowers, the cages of canaries and the pert waitresses in yellow sun-back dresses, white ruffled aprons and saucy little ruffled caps. Young, they looked so terribly young. She sighed.

"Hi, beautiful," Joe said to the waitress who at last got round to handing them menus. "Let's see what's cooking."

Miss Eva pretended to study the menu. But after sitting in the blinding sunlight for so long, she could barely make out a word or two here and there. Was she going to have to wear glasses? "I'll just have a bowl of clam chowder," she said, laying aside the menu. Then as Joe looked up, concern in his eyes, she added quickly, "Some cold sliced turkey and salad."

"Sure that's enough? I don't think I'm going to be able to do with any such slim pickin's as that."

"Oh, you take the whole dinner, whatever it is." Miss Eva smiled. "You know I love to see you eat."

"You're going to see plenty then. I'm really going to work on this."

While he studied the menu, Miss Eva's eye was caught by her own reflection in the mirror on the wall behind him. How awful she looked, her nose red from the sun, a lock of hair blown across her cheek, the scarf under her chin emphasizing rather than concealing her dishevelment! "You order, Joe, I'll just go freshen up a bit." And as she slipped away, she heard him saying to the waitress at his elbow, "I want the whole works, sugar, here to here, and for the lady——"

She fled to the powder room. Sugar! He had called that little waitress by what she thought of as her own special pet name. Oh, why had they come to this awful place? After the lovely morning on the dunes. It was too much. But while she was raging inwardly, she was busily shaking out her scarf, smoothing her hair, yet loosening it a bit, the way Joe liked it, putting powder on the sunburned nose. There, at last, she looked better, though that might be partly due to the pink-shaded light in here. All the same, her navy linen suit was trim and becoming. She wasn't young, but still, she thought, she did have a look of distinction and maybe she wasn't going to pieces just yet a while. Maybe she could last a few years yet. Oh, Lord, give me just two, or three or four! We might stay in South America that long. After that I could take anything.

So bracing herself, she came back into the dining-room. Joe, seeing her across the room, got up and stood waiting behind her chair. She flashed him a quick smile as she sat down. After all, she was the one for whom he rose, she was the one he wanted as his travelling companion. She had the more important place. "What's all this?" she said, looking at the elaborate dish before her.

"Fruit cup. You've just got to try it. One of the specialties here."

Pleased at his thoughtfulness, Miss Eva tried and found the fruit cup delicious. It seemed to help her head. Maybe all she needed after all was food—and the sight of Joe giving all his attention to his dinner. Oh, it was a pleasure to see anyone fall to with such relish! No matter what he called the waitress. He just hadn't been thinking, he could not have known what it meant to her, unaccustomed as she was to endearments.

Her high spirits lasted through the meal, and when they had finished, she took some bills from her purse, slipped them across to him saying, "You take care of the bill for me, will you, Joe? I'll be waiting in the car." And going out cherishing the quick grateful glance he had given her, she was delighted that she had thought of that. It was just a little thing but, well, a man liked to take charge, to pay the bill, to

have at least the appearance of being the host. Then too, she thought, leaving him alone with that saucy-looking little waitress was proof to him, if he needed it, or to herself who did surely need it, proof that she had no fear. Leave a man free, she had always heard. That was the way to hold him.

Joe was not long in coming, she saw with relief. Yes, he was coming quickly, back to her. Then she saw the girl, that waitress, the brazen hussy, running after him, calling to him, saw Joe stop short, turn back—too, too eagerly. They stood in the doorway, side by side, laughing, and the girl's voice came to her clearly through the still air, across the open parking space. "Your mother forgot her scarf. Such a pretty one, too."

"Thanks, baby," Joe said.

Miss Eva turned her head away, pretended not to have heard and, as Joe came up, made a show of being occupied with the radio, turning one knob and then the other at wild random, anything so he would not think she had noticed, had heard that light young voice, that terrible voice which had fallen on her ears like the crack of doom. She looked up from the radio as if surprised. "Oh, my scarf! I'm glad you found it. I forgot it completely." She tied it over her head, wishing it were bigger, wishing it could cover her face, wishing it could envelop her entirely, so that she might shrink and shrivel unnoticed.

"How about putting up the top?" Joe said. "We've got burn enough for one day."

"Yes, do," Miss Eva said. But now as they came back into the highway and headed homeward, she was shut up, imprisoned here with those dreadful words echoing and re-echoing in her ears: "Your mother, your mother forgot her scarf. Your mother——" Oh, was there no escape? Was it always to be like this whenever she relaxed and gave herself to the pleasure of the moment? She leaned back against the seat and despair possessed her.

There was more traffic now. They came up on the high bridge over the canal, swooped around the great traffic circle there and began to mount the hill. When they reached the top and a long stretch of open road led on ahead of them, Miss

Eva cried, "Faster, faster, Joe!" Oh, if they could only go fast enough to overtake time itself, and go back into a time that was past and forever gone! Like one of the jet planes travelling round the world, arriving, by the clocks, before it started.

Joe laughed and pressed down the accelerator, the car leaped forward, ate up the miles. But he slowed down at the curve, looked round with a smile. "Not a nerve in the old body, is there?"

"Not one," Miss Eva managed to say. The old body—he even dared to tease her about her age! Yet he had spoken with such admiration, such warmth and affection that there was no sting in the words. Tears sprang into Miss Eva's eyes, tears of relief, of despair, of hope, of helplessness. Oh, if she could only believe that it made no difference to him!

They were caught for a while behind a line of cars. Joe turned on the radio and Miss Eva was grateful for the music that allowed her silence. The programme ended as they came in the last stretch before home. Joe flicked the button off. "You're mighty quiet, Miss Eva."

She racked her brain for some excuse. "It's the clams," she said with a shaky laugh. "I'm giving all my attention to digesting them." She went on, grasping at anything to keep Joe from knowing how she really felt, talking any nonsense that came into her head, and putting on that formal manner and precision of speech which always amused him. "Clams die fighting, they don't give up even when attacked by the digestive juices. Personally involved as I am, I find this last stand of the bivalves completely absorbing."

Joe laughed as he turned the car down the lane. "Nobody like you, Miss Eva. You're one in a million. Maybe a nap'll help you settle their hash—only it was chowder, wasn't it? There's a ball game on I want to listen to myself, unless I go to sleep in the middle of it. All this fresh air——" He yawned, turned in at the gate, put on the brake. "I'll let you take the short way in. I'll dust her off a bit. Got to take good care of the old bus. She's going to take us a fur piece, as they say down in Louisiana."

Miss Eva thought she could not possibly sleep, but she did. Hard and long. When she came downstairs, the sun was down.

She looked in the living-room and there was Joe sprawled out on the couch. Sleeping like a baby, she thought with tenderness. The radio, turned down low so as not to disturb her, no doubt, still buzzed on the small table by his head. Miss Eva tiptoed out to the kitchen. She felt better now after her nap, in a mood to accept, to take whatever came, not kick against the pricks. And she was always pleased to be able to get ahead of Joe and prepare a meal before he knew what she was about. She herself was not hungry—a glass of milk would do her—but she found something for Joe and brought it all in on one tray.

She clicked off the radio and that made him stir, blink. "Lord," he said, sitting up, "I must have been dozing."

"Dozing? You were dead to the world."

"Nothing of the kind." He took the tray from her, set it on the card table and pulled up chairs. "I knew perfectly well when you came downstairs."

"You didn't look it. And what's more you'd have been out in the kitchen, if you'd been awake."

"Well, I don't know. Maybe I like to be waited on now and then."

"And I like to wait on you," Miss Eva said, serious all at once. It was a pleasure she could count on. Other pleasures had their dark, their difficult side, but this was pure, unalloyed.

"I shouldn't let you," Joe said, a new note in his voice, an unhappy twist to his lips. "I've been thinking—" But he broke off, he did not tell her, though she waited, uncertain, vaguely uneasy. Was he regretting what he had said on the dunes this morning? Was he going to destroy that lovely dream? She had to know. "What have you been thinking?"

"Wh-what's that? Oh, just a stupid play I heard on the radio. These people in a plane accident, a murder—" He walked up and down the room as he sketched the story for her. He looked at pictures, examined a corner of the old desk from which a bit of inlay was missing. His mind evidently was not on what he was saying and Miss Eva only pretended to listen. This was not what he had set out to say. If he would only tell her! And yet she hesitated to ask. She was afraid

to ask. At last, saying something about the long day in the open air, she started to rise.

Joe, still pacing back and forth, waved her down again. "Just a minute." He reached in his pocket and brought out some bills, a few pieces of silver. "Your change from dinner." He laid them down on the table beside her.

"I'd forgotten all about it. Just leave it there. I'll put it away in the morning."

But Joe was not through yet. "Listen." He turned on her fiercely. "I haven't kept anything back from you. You know the worst there is about me—in most ways."

"Y-yes," Miss Eva said after a moment's hesitation. Did he mean—about that girl in Germany, the one in Louisiana, his grandfather—

"I don't make any pretence with you. You know that."

"Yes," she said again, guardedly, adding a silent "perhaps."

"Well——" He took up his uneasy walking back and forth again. Then he burst out, "It's just that you're so—so decent, so generous, never thinking about yourself, so straight." He turned away, went to the window and stood there, looking out into the darkness. "I haven't been altogether straight with you. Like that change there——" He made a gesture toward the table, still without looking round. "I could have kept it. You never would have thought of it again."

"N-no, I suppose not." What on earth was he getting at?

"It wouldn't be the first time." He flung around and faced her. "I've been chiselling on you, a little here, a little there—change from the marketing, a cheaper cut of meat, all that sort of thing. Oh, I know it was inexcusable. But I just . . . I just have the habit of . . . of getting what I can regardless. But with you, I can't do it any more." He took a roll of bills out of his pocket and flung it down on the desk. "Commission on the car, too," he mumbled.

Miss Eva sat stunned. It was as if with those words Joe had set himself away from her, in another, an alien world of which she knew nothing save by hearsay, by reading. "It—it's not the money," she faltered at last. "I don't want it, I don't care a thing about it—you know that, in spite of all my small economics——" She choked.

"I know, I know," he broke in fiercely. "It's because you see now what a heel I am. Well, go ahead, throw me out——" He turned away from her, shoulders drooping.

"Oh, Joe! No, no, my dear, my darling one." She was at his side now, her hand on his arm. The sense of shock was still there, yet it had been overlaid by another, more powerful emotion—her pity for his distress. "Please don't say such a thing. I could never do that. And now you've told me . . . now you realize . . . don't you see . . .?" She began again. "Yes, first off I . . . I was . . . well, taken aback, I admit that. But now"—she looked down at her hand on his arm and involuntarily her fingers tightened their hold—"now it might be that I'm a little proud of you, that you told me. Even a little proud of—of myself, that somehow I've made you see what—what's right. Can't you understand that?" She turned him round, made him face her, made him meet her smiling eyes.

Slowly the strained taut look left his face. He bent, caught both her hands in his, lifted them to his lips, his cheek, his lips again. "If I ever amount to anything in this world, it'll be due to you, my angel. God knows."

"Oh, come now, don't talk nonsense. Go get a drink for us, and make it a good one."

Joe drew a long breath. "Lord, you don't know how that's been eating me."

"You can forget it now," Miss Eva said. She would not forget it, but, for the moment at least, only exultation remained, and she thought of Mr. Whitman's words: "It may be that you will be a real influence in the young man's life."

Joe at the door said without looking round, "I'll bring your nightcap up to you."

13

JUNE had come, and with it a few small changes came to Shadbush Lane. The bridge club was having its last meeting of the year at Mrs. Wake's house. Miss Eva was eager to be through with it and home again because Joe seldom went to Boston on his day off, now the weather was so warm. He

preferred taking sandwiches and spending the day on the big beach swimming and sunning himself. As usual this morning he had asked Miss Eva if she would come along with him, but as usual she had refused—was it from a certain unease she felt in public with him, caution against the sort of talk which went on in small towns? In any case, she told him she would have her dip in the bay when the tide came up. The water was warmer there.

Miss Eva was glad this was the last of their bridge games today. She needed no contact with even this small bit of the outside world, needed and wanted none. Mrs. Hildon's avalanche of grandchildren was due to arrive next week and, as she laughed and said, she was just too old to put her mind on bridge while she would have so many small distractions about. Mrs. Wake's college girl had come and she herself was planning several brief trips to the races. "I allow myself just so much to spend and when that's gone I come home. If I stay longer you'll know I've been lucky." Mrs. Starling was the only one unaffected by the arrival of summer. "Only difference to me is that I leave off my woollen underwear," she said.

They had had a fine, spirited game this afternoon in Mrs. Wake's small cluttered parlour, each one playing her best, fighting over every point, giving herself a good final fling, for who could tell what might happen before September came round again?

"Well, that's that," Mrs. Hildon said with a sigh of satisfaction, taking the last trick.

Mrs. Wake rose as Miss Eva gathered the cards together and Mrs. Starling began to add up the score. She went to the door and called "Daphne? Daphne! Where is that girl?"

"Daphne! What a heathen name," Mrs. Starling muttered.

"A very pretty one, and just suits her. A darling-looking little thing, so vivid and alive," Mrs. Hildon said.

Mrs. Wake went to the window and called again, turned away with a laugh. "She heard me this time—out hanging over the fence chinning with that Joe of yours, Miss Eva."

Miss Eva gave a little start. She didn't know Joe was home yet, and most of all, she didn't know that he knew Daphne.

"Looks like the sort that would prefer anything in pants to doing her job," Mrs. Starling said.

"Oh, come now," Mrs. Hildon chided. "You know it's only natural for young folks to take to each other."

Miss Eva felt a sharp constriction in the pit of her stomach. But no, no, she wouldn't let herself think——

"She does her job all right," Mrs. Wake said stoutly. Lately she had taken to standing up to Mrs. Starling in quite a new way, and strange to say Mrs. Starling took it without a murmur, in fact, rather seemed to like it. She shook out an elaborately embroidered, lace-edged table cover—Mrs. Starling examined a corner of it surreptitiously as if to make sure it was not linen—and smoothed it over the table. "I've never had a more quick or efficient college girl in the house. She's really quite a wonder, what she's done in her short life. Her people have nothing, there's nobody to help her, and she's putting herself through college—Cornell—the hotel-management course."

Mrs. Starling grunted. "Hotel management! What on earth are we coming to! What can a girl find to do around a hotel, will someone please tell me? A decent girl, I mean."

"Yes, ma'am," said a crisp young voice from the doorway. "I'll be glad to tell you."

They all turned, too startled for speech, as Daphne, tray in hand, entered the room. She wore a two-piece bathing suit—barely big enough to cover her nakedness, Miss Eva thought. She was all brown and gold, her fair skin flecked with freckles, her short curly hair a fiery red, a real flame red and, with that yellow and green bathing suit, strikingly colourful.

Moving with quick noiseless step, she placed the tray before Mrs. Wake and while setting the plates around, arranging the sandwiches and cookies at exactly diagonal positions, within reach of all, she enumerated the various kinds of positions open to girls about a hotel, concluding, with a snap of her flashing eyes, "And finally, perhaps the most important of all, the dietician. That's me. Anything more, Bella?" she added in a less belligerent tone.

"No, thank you, honey," Mrs. Wake replied, apparently not even aware that Daphne had addressed her so familiarly. "You run along now for your swim."

Mrs. Starling gave her little cackle. "Well! Live and learn, I always say."

"Okiedoke," said Daphne and was gone as quickly as she had arrived.

Barefoot, Miss Eva noticed now. That was how she had come upon them so noiselessly. Mrs. Hildon let out her great hearty laugh. "I wish you could have seen your face, Mrs. Starling, when she spoke up from the door."

"I like people who speak up," Mrs. Starling announced, "but I must say that enough of a thing is enough. I suppose another generation and they'll all be running around stark-naked. At least I'll not be here to see it."

"Lovely body, she has, did you notice?" Mrs. Hildon said, helping herself to sandwiches and putting another lump of sugar in the tea Mrs. Wake had poured for her. "It must be all the vitamins and wheat germ and things the young get fed on nowadays. Every last one of my grandchildren is sturdier than any of my children at their age. It's getting the sunshine on their skin, too, as we never used to do."

"Some of us have been able to survive very well, without running around naked in the sun," Mrs. Starling remarked.

Miss Eva sipped her tea in silence. She had seen little beyond the girl's face. Quite homely, really, she had noted with some satisfaction—a square little face with high cheekbones and a determined set to the chin. Hard as nails, she had thought. Nothing soft and feminine about her. All those freckles, too, and that dreadful hair—though nowadays, she had heard, it was more admired than in her own youth when red hair was considered a real affliction.

"Such energy as that child has," Mrs. Wake was saying as she urged more sandwiches on Mrs. Hildon and glanced around to be sure everyone was served. "Why, she was up at dawn today, I do believe, and she sits up half the night in that little ell bedroom out there, playing the phonograph and records she brought with her. Why, by the time I got dressed this morning and came in here I found the whole place cleaned up. Gave me quite a start, all my doll collection"—she waved to the row of dolls that sat on the top shelf of the low bookcases which ran round the room—"every last one of

them stripped bare. She said their clothes were dusty. We had great fun dressing them again after she had done washing and ironing every stitch, even their panties and petticoats. Not being a New Englander, I always say if it don't show, it don't matter."

"Nothing lazy-looking about her, I will say," Mrs. Starling admitted. "But personally I can't get used to the way young people nowadays call everybody by their first names. From the day I met him till the day he died I never called Dr. S. anything more familiar than Doctor, and I just can't get used to it." Then with one of her quick leaps from one subject to another, she added, "How'll she get a swim? The tide's out."

"Oh, she has her bicycle, thinks nothing of pedalling out to the big beach any hour of day or night."

"Ah, to be young again!" Mrs. Hildon sighed. But she didn't look as if she really cared too much about it, Miss Eva thought. She herself was glad to realize she envied the girl nothing, not even her youth—if it had to bring with it all the disadvantages this poor child was burdened with. She had been foolish to allow herself even the most fleeting sense of alarm over Joe's talking to her over the fence. This girl had nothing for anyone like Joe.

She wondered a bit at not finding him there when she went home, but that evening when she mentioned casually that Mrs. Wake thought she had seen him come in just as they were about to have tea, he said, "Oh, yes, I ran home to get my sunglasses. It was awfully hot and glary on the beach this afternoon with that land breeze we had." Then with a quick glance at her, he added, "I was talking to Mrs. Wake's college girl. She called to me as I was going out. What's her name?"

"Daphne, I believe."

"Oh, yes, that's right."

"Quite attractive, they all seemed to think, and very efficient, according to Mrs. Wake."

"She may be efficient," Joe admitted with a laugh. "But attractive? Not my type."

"I shouldn't imagine so," Miss Eva said, feeling better and better as she added, "Poor child, with that dreadful hair! I'm glad she's clever." It was then, on sudden impulse, that she

felt able, she felt safe, to say something which had been in the back of her mind ever since that day they had spent on the dunes and had dinner at that horrible roadhouse. "Joe?"

"Yes?" He leaned forward to see her better, caught perhaps by something in her tone. They were in the octagonal screened summer room where they often sat of an evening now, the only light coming through the open door from the sitting-room. "Yes? What's on your mind, honey?"

The endearment gave her courage. "I've been thinking—about us, you know."

"Yes?" he said again, more cautiously, it seemed.

"I want you to feel free, always."

"Free?"

"Yes. I mean"—she swallowed, began again; this was more difficult than she had expected—"I mean if you should ever see someone your own age . . . you are young, and maybe . . ."

Joe's hearty laugh interrupted her. "Lord, is that what you're getting at! And if that isn't just like you, always thinking of me, bless you. Of course I'm free." He poured himself another drink. "And absolutely bound and hog-tied by the million good things you are—and loving every minute of it."

Miss Eva drew a long sigh of relief and let him give her an extra drink on it.

That feeling of security persisted through the weeks that followed. Joe was, if such a thing were possible, even more thoughtful and tender with her than he had ever been. And to her great relief, on the rare occasions now when she saw Mrs. Wake and Mrs. Hildon, there was no more exchange of anxious glances when Joe's name came up, no more innuendoes about people who fell under the influence of some unscrupulous person and had to be rescued. Mrs. Starling had never had any part in that, though she didn't hesitate to tell Miss Eva more than once that she was spoiling the boy to death. "What sort of life is this for a young man? It'll be the ruination of him. He ought to be out in the world making a living in proper fashion." But to that Miss Eva answered with only a smile. Little did Mrs. Starling know what she had in mind, she thought, and her imagination leaped ahead to the fall and the time when she would startle them all by

saying some fine day that she was leaving—alone, they would think—for a trip to South America!

It was true, Joe made little reference to their plans, though now and then there was an occasion when he might have spoken. As about the seat covers. He said one morning, "You know, I think it might be a good idea to get some seat covers for the car. I always sit on a towel when I come back from the beach, but I can't help getting some sand scattered around. Not too good for that handsome leather. How about it?"

"A very good idea. I wonder where——"

"They wouldn't have any here at the garage," Joe went on, "but I could get a book of samples from them and we could order from Boston."

"Splendid!" Miss Eva agreed. "It would be a good thing anyway, for a long trip—with luggage and all——"

"Luggage?" Joe repeated with a puzzled look. Then collecting himself—he had been a bit absent-minded lately, Miss Eva thought—he laughed and said, "Sure, sure, I should have thought of that."

So the summer days went by, Miss Eva taking her dip in the bay where Mrs. Hildon's grandchildren paddled, and Joe off at some time almost every day for a few hours at the big beach. He loved the sun, he said. Though now and then when the moon was full, and the night warm, he would excuse himself and go for a cooling-off swim before going to bed. He looked the picture of health, Miss Eva was delighted to see, bronzed and ruddy. He drank less too, and Miss Eva was pleased at that, though of course he had never drunk to excess. And he got more sleep, often turning in before Miss Eva herself was even thinking about going to bed. But he was young, she would think, indulgently, he needed more sleep than she did.

Lately she herself had not been sleeping well. She woke at odd hours out of troubled dreams. In one that was almost a nightmare, she thought she heard a step on the stair, Brother Henry's step, and rushing out in the headlong manner of dreams she had found someone sprawled on the bathroom floor. Not Brother Henry, but Joe. From that she had wakened in a cold sweat. It was on one of these wakeful nights

that at last, despairing of sleep, she put on her dressing-gown and went down for a glass of hot milk, tiptoeing so as not to disturb Joe.

She was surprised to find the small kitchen light still on. She would chide Joe about it in the morning and he in turn would tease her about being so saving. She heated her milk, put out the light and went upstairs. But sleep would not come. She heard the clock strike four. Oh, she would be a wreck tomorrow! What was the matter with her? She tossed and turned. Then suddenly, like an echo of that fearful dream, she heard the creak of the one loose step of the stair. A shiver ran along her spine. Joe? But it couldn't be Joe, he had gone up to bed early. After a little she stole quietly out through the open door to the sunroom. Yes, he was up and awake, for there was a long rectangular block of yellow light coming from his window, falling across the lawn, touching the rhododendrons.

She came back to bed, lay there, uneasy, puzzled, tormented and yet all the time telling herself that she could have imagined the step, as she had dreamed it not long ago, and as for the light—well, couldn't Joe, too, have been wakeful and turned it on to read for a while? At last she slept a little, waking early. She had breakfast ready before Joe came down. He had overslept.

Almost his first words reassured her. "Gosh, what a hot night! When it does get hot here, it goes for it in a big way. I hope you slept better than I did." He sat down at the table, smothered a yawn.

"Oh, I made out all right." Miss Eva poured his coffee and went back to the stove for the bacon and eggs.

"Don't tell me that. You were up prowling around."

Miss Eva laughed. What an old silly she had been! "How do you know?"

"Came in from a dip—trying to get cooled down a bit—and had to stumble around in the dark. You and your electric-light bills!"

"Oh, that. A regular Sherlock Holmes, you are. But two can play that game." She poured their coffee and sat down. "You must have gone to sleep in the water. It was all hours when you came in."

He looked round the table. "Where's the cream?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot it." She went to the refrigerator and got it out. "Now I don't take it myself, I'm not so careful to put it on."

"Thanks." Joc stifled another yawn. "Yes, I was late. That girl next door is a kind of nuisance sometimes. I've run into her now and then on the beach, you know. Good swimmer, though. Well, last night I was out hanging up my bathing suit on the line back there. Her light was on and she saw me, called me in to hear some records—she's got quite a collection. Gave me some beer and I sat there listening till after midnight I dare say, too sleepy to get up and come home."

"That was nice," Miss Eva said. Midnight? It was nearer daybreak, as she very well knew. But she said nothing. Joe was so open and frank about it that she would overlook that small discrepancy. It might well be that he just had not noticed the time. "By the way," she added, "what about those seat covers? You're getting awfully absent-minded these days."

"Lord, I clean forgot. I'll go over right away and get the book of samples. Could I have another cup of coffee so I'll get halfway waked up before I go, please, ma'am."

"Indeed you can. But you'd better go back to bed and get some sleep."

"Maybe I had at that." Then looking up at her as she stood beside him pouring his coffee, he said, "Lord, how you do spoil me! And how I love it!"

Miss Eva filled her own cup. "Maybe I do, but no matter." She sat down, smiled at him across the table. "What would I be doing with myself if I didn't have you here to fuss at about lights and not getting enough sleep and all that?"

"Oh, you'd be into some kind of mischief, I don't doubt." Joe laughed. "And if you don't know what you'd do without me, what would I—Lord, I don't know how I ever made out before I found you!"

It was not the first time he had said something like that. Was he saying it too often? The question, like a cat's-paw of wind on the water, touched the surface of her consciousness and moved on.

It was the middle of August now. At times Miss Eva longed to see the coming of Labour Day which would put an official end to the season. Again she dreaded the fall. There would have to be changes then, and she had not the habit of change. She drew back from it. Yet how unreasonable to feel so, she told herself. She had been eager for life, adventure, danger. And she was still eager. She longed to go, to be free, to set out in search of new experience. And with Joe—ah, there was the glory of it!—and the rub. It was the involvements, the complications, the difficulties, she feared. But one had to take the bad along with the good, didn't one? Could it be, she demanded of herself in a sudden flash of clarity, that as long as the adventure remained far-off, nebulous, vague as a dream, she could not wait to undertake it, boldly and recklessly, and when it came right down to the matter of saying, "Well, I'm off for South America next week," to the irreversible commitment of packing her bags and closing the house, she shrank from the very thought? Was she a coward, then?

While all these things were seething back and forth in her mind, something happened that wiped out every thought of the negative side of her dream and made her feel ready to undertake any hazard, any difficulty, if only she could be sure of Joe's being with her.

She had gone out one warm evening into the early dusk just after dinner to gather a basket of zinnias for the church book-and-flower sale the next day. If she put the stems in water over night, they might keep better, she thought. When she came back into the kitchen, she found the dishes still unwashed. That wasn't like Joe. If he was going to do them—they rather took turns at it nowadays—he usually whipped through in the quickest possible fashion. In fact there were times when she had had to do the glasses over again, not letting him see, of course, for he would feel terrible if he knew. What could have taken him away? She went on into the butler's pantry and began lifting the zinnias from basket to

sink. Then she heard Joe's voice in the back hall, at the telephone, a voice she had never heard before, petulant, angry. She was so astonished that she stood there listening for a moment before she realized what she was doing.

"I won't stand for that kind of talk and you know it. . . . Can't you get it through that thick head of yours that I . . . Then why don't you leave the door unlocked? . . . What do you think I——"

Hastily Miss Eva turned on the water in the sink. She hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but even though Joe lowered his voice now she could still hear him above the running of the water.

" . . . and don't phone me here again, do you hear?" And with that he slammed the receiver down so hard he might have broken it.

Miss Eva soused the zinnia stems up and down in the water. Who in the world could he have been talking to like that? He did not leave her long in doubt. A moment later he came stamping into the butler's pantry.

"Women! They make me sick," he fumed. "Oh, not you, you're different, thank heaven. What are you doing here in the dark?" He put on the light.

"Just sticking these in water. Why don't you go on out on the porch and let me bring you a cool drink? You look all het up."

"Whew! I am, and I'll do just that, my lady, unless you'll let me——"

"No, no, I know what you like."

"Ought to by this time." Joc laughed, his good humour completely restored, it seemed.

But when they were seated in the screened-in octagonal room, he began to grumble again. "That girl—she makes me furious."

"Who?"

"That daffy tomato next door. Daffy is the right name for her all right."

"What's she done?"

"Called me on the phone just now and gave me hell because I didn't come over last night and listen to some new records

she'd got. I'd run into her on the beach, and once she gets hold of you— Well, anyway, I thought I'd drop in for a minute or so just to keep the peace. Went over there and the side door was locked. I knocked"—he laughed—"not too enthusiastically, I admit—and she didn't open up, so naturally I came on home and went to bed like any sensible person. Now what does she do but call me up and scorch my ears off. Lord, what a temper! I pity the man that gets her."

"Well, never mind. She'll be gone soon." It really was funny, Miss Eva thought. Instead of Joe's comforting her with the reminder that soon there would be nobody around to take his attention from her, she was having to console him with the thought that the summer would soon be gone and Daphne with it.

Joe stretched out comfortably in the wicker chair, rattled the ice in his drink. "Well, meanwhile, this is a pretty nice——" He broke off abruptly, sat up. "Damn," he muttered.

"What is it?"

"Here comes the old bird—just as we get settled for a quiet evening. If that isn't hard luck!"

Miss Eva looked around and saw Mrs. Starling making her way across the lawn. "Oh dear," she sighed.

"Hope you won't mind if I beat it."

"Of course not," Miss Eva told him, lowering her voice as Mrs. Starling approached. "You'd better go over and apologize to that girl for the way you talked to her on the phone—no matter what the provocation."

"You really think I have to?" He made a face at the prospect.

"Yes, I do," Miss Eva said with decision.

"Well, I wouldn't do it for anybody but you." He drained his glass as he rose. But he waited and opened the door for Mrs. Starling, inviting her in with as much cordiality as if she were the one person he had been longing to see.

How easy it was for him to put on that false yet utterly convincing air of sincerity! Miss Eva thought. Not that he did it with her, of course. And yet, if with others, why not with her? Why should she be exempt? Could it be—— "Come

right in, Mrs. Starling. If there is a breath stirring, we get it on this porch." Was it possible— The question which had so often risen only to be quickly buried under her own pride, self-assurance or unwillingness to see what she did not want to see, emerged now, vivid, shattering.

"I figured it would be cooler here," Mrs. Starling was saying. "My, but it's been a scorcher!"

"Sit here, Mrs. Starling." Joe drew up the chair he had been sitting in. "This is more comfortable. I'll get you a glass of cold lemonade. That'll cool you off."

"Now that's real thoughtful of you, Joe."

Miss Eva, watching him cross the porch with his light springy step, felt suspicion buzzing in her mind, felt it growing, gathering together the small things which her consciousness had registered and discarded, from the morning of his arrival to this very evening when he had made that elaborate explanation of his conversation with Daphne over the telephone. It was as if first a single bee, then a whole swarm, had swooped down upon her.

"Nothing like the citrus fruits for cooling one off, I've heard Doctor say a thousand times," Mrs. Starling went on. "Thins the blood, makes us able to endure the heat. Never knew such a dry summer. My garden is about done for."

"Yes, mine too." Miss Eva heard her own voice as if it came from a great distance, speaking of the long drought and the constant watering that seemed to do no good at all.

Joe came back with the lemonade. "Here you are, ma'am. And now if you'll excuse me——"

"Joe?" The single word, like a cry of distress, stopped him in the doorway, made him turn quickly. Miss Eva's eyes searched his face, found nothing there but smiling readiness to do whatever she asked.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"N-never mind. I mean . . . there was something . . ." She racked her brain for an excuse, a reason for having called him back like this. "Oh, just those zinnias. Would you take them over to Mrs. Wake? Tell her to just leave them in the fruit jars overnight and I would like the jars back. They're always useful." She turned to Mrs. Starling. "Mrs. Wake promised

to take my flowers for me tomorrow morning. The book-and-flower sale, you know."

Joe said he'd be glad to do it, and left them. He was no sooner out of earshot than Mrs. Starling with her little bleat of laughter said, "Glad of any excuse that takes him over that way, I guess."

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"Why, haven't you seen which way the wind blows? It was no secret to me, long before I saw them on the beach that afternoon. You remember I told you my old school friend Molly Greet drove by to see me—oh, two weeks ago, maybe."

"Yes, yes." Miss Eva leaned forward, suddenly breathless from the weight that seemed to be settling down on her chest. Oh, why couldn't the woman come right out with it instead of beating around the bush like this? "Yes, I know, the friend who has lived in Florida for so many years."

"That's right, I did tell you about her. Let's see—it was two weeks ago come Friday—no, it was a Thursday because your Clara was leaving as we came back. Molly just dropped in out of a clear blue sky—Molly Norwood, that was."

"Yes, you told me. You went to the beach with her?"

"What's that? Oh, yes. Nothing would do but she must drive me over to the beach. Said she hadn't been there in forty years and she wanted to see how the dunes were holding out. It seems her father—they used to come down here years ago, you know—well, her father always predicted that in fifty years the sea would be right over the dunes and into the bay. And very near right he was too. It's a shame the selectmen or somebody doesn't do something——"

Miss Eva could bear it no longer. "You saw Joe over there?"

"Yes, couldn't miss him." Mrs. Starling leaned forward suddenly, sniffed the air. "There, do you feel it? A sea change. Wind's to the east. That's the end of this hot spell, thank heaven!"

"It must have been hot that day on the beach," Miss Eva said, holding her like a skittish colt.

"That day? Oh, you mean the day Molly came down. Yes, it was a scorcher, worse than today. I told her so, no day for the beach, I said. Sand flies, glare and a west wind that

whipped the sand right over my shoe-tops. I must have emptied out three quarters of a measuring cup, well, two thirds anyway, when we got home."

"Then you must have walked along the shore a bit. And you saw——" Oh, it was like dragging a horse to water again and again, and never being able to make him drink! Never, never, surely had Mrs. Starling wandered and digressed in such a maddening fashion. "You saw Joe out there?"

"Yes, back of what's left of the second sand dune. Now in such a case I blame the girl more than the man. It's always the girl who sets the level, as I told my boy Amos when he first took up with that girl who dragged him into marrying her——"

"You saw Joe and Daphne there?"

"What's that? Oh, yes, those two. Such an unseemly display. Dr. S. diagnosed it all right. 'Trouble with the younger generation,' he said a thousand times, 'trouble with them is they've had an overdose of sexlax.' I must say I never saw two people so close together in a public place. Or any other, for that matter. After all, modern times are all very well but there's some things that call for a certain amount of privacy. Lovering and dying have that much in common. Remember that line about the Duchess of Argyle?"

Miss Eva was thankful for the semi-darkness which hid her face from spying eyes. Hurt, disappointment and bitter raging jealousy swept over her. She made a small choking sound. Mrs. Starling took it for encouragement and went on with her quotation: "'I find it will not do,' said the Duchess of Argyle, dying. 'Desire the Duke to leave the room.' Funny how a line like that will stick in your head, isn't it? And you'll forget your best friend's name in a pinch. Like Molly when she walked in on me that day. I couldn't call her name for the life of me. 'Why, Amanda,' she said, 'have you lost your wits? Don't you know me—Molly Greet?' I said——"

Miss Eva sat rigid in her chair murmuring a word here, another there, hoping they made sense but not much caring if they didn't. She was too stunned to know what she was doing or saying. But she must have done the right thing—thanks to habit, the habit of many years—for eventually Mrs.

Starling without seeming to notice anything amiss was saying it was actually too cool to sit out any longer, would you believe it? and that she was going home to bed.

When she had disappeared in the darkness across the lawn, Miss Eva stood beside the screen door, twisting her hands, shivering now in the cool east breeze, her mind in a turmoil. Joe had deceived her. She knew he had been careless, unscrupulous in the past, but with her until this evening she had believed him open and sincere. She wanted to go off somewhere and die. Oh, she must get quickly to her room lest Joe come home and find her here shivering in the dark! Hurry, hurry, turn out the light so he would think she had gone early to bed. Breathless, stumbling, she fled up the stairs.

In her own room she flung herself face down on the bed. Joe, Joe, how could you? Pretending to me that she meant nothing, that you were bored to death with her, and all the time— Oh, what a liar, what a low deceiving wretch! But shouldn't she have known, couldn't she have read the signs—all he had told her about his life, that girl in Louisiana, about his grandfather, about that money he had—chiselled was the word he used, evading the plain truth. He had stolen it. And she had thought with such pride that she had been a good influence, that he had changed. Oh, he couldn't change, the leopard could not change his spots. She had been a fool to think for a moment that she really meant anything to him.

Little by little the disappointment, and some of the hurt too, were lost in a flood of anger, against him, against that girl next door. I hate her, I hate her, she cried aloud. And she wanted to hurt Joe, as he had hurt her. But what could she do? She couldn't go out and flirt, carry on with some man—don't be ridiculous, she told herself. But there must be some way. Yes, she thought at last, sitting up abruptly. One thing she felt sure of: Joe would worry about her if he thought she was in danger. Yes, yes, that was it, make him think something terrible had happened to her. No sooner had the idea hit her than she was up, running downstairs, stopping only to snatch up a coat from the back hall, and to turn on all the lights as she went. That would let him know she had not just gone quietly to bed, that would startle the hell out of him,

she thought with satisfaction. Only he must not come home till she was safely out and away. Lord, Lord, don't let him come yet! Let me get away first!

Out at the barn, pushing open the door, she swore at the noise it made, creaking as it swung open. But thank heaven the car's engine made no noise; it started up quickly. She backed out, then, on sudden impulse, jumped out and closed the door of the garage. Let him think she had gone along-shore for a walk, let him think she was drowned. Without turning on the lights—there was a high young moon—she drove out through the gates, along the lane. It was not till she had passed Mrs. Hildon's corner that she put on the lights, and then, stepping on the gas, she sent the car flying up the lane to turn with a screech of tyres into the main street.

She had no licence, she remembered now. Somehow they had postponed the trip to Brockton for her test, though she had long since been ready for it. But no matter, Miss Eva didn't care. Let them put her in jail if they dared. She'd as soon be there as at home. Or in the hospital, she thought as the bright lights of an oncoming car blinded her. Yet instinctively she put on the brakes, slowed down till it was by. She didn't really want broken bones. But where was she going?

The bridge was lined with fishermen and when she came to the other end and circled round the parking space, she found it half filled with cars. There were too many people in the world, she thought savagely as she braked the car and sat there, lights out, staring through a gap between the dunes at the black sea. She would walk, she decided suddenly, walk till she dropped.

But when she was out of the car, and past the dunes, she found it was high tide. There was nowhere to go but in the deep sand. She hadn't the strength to go far, ploughing her way like this with every step. And besides, ahead she saw the light of fires—picnicking parties, more people. There was no proper privacy here. She turned back. Now, approaching the parking lot, she saw that not all the other cars there were empty. Here and there, a dark figure—no, two dark figures—stirred, a murmur of voices came to her as she passed. Rage possessed her then. Young people. Necking—that was what

they called it. She got into the car and slammed the door, put on the lights and drove round the circle twice before she took to the bridge. Let them be startled, let them think she was the police, checking on their disgraceful behaviour. God, how she hated the casual callous young! One girl one night, another the next— Oh, she must get away, get away where she would not be reminded!

She was on the main highway, heading toward Boston before she realized what she was doing. What now? She looked at the clock on the dash. It was not quite ten. Too early to go home. How could she put in the time till midnight? For she was resolved to let Joe suffer and stew at least till then. The thought came like an inspiration. It was fifteen miles to go, but all the better, it would take longer.

What the picture was, Miss Eva never knew. Something to look at and now and then catch her attention. She sat on through the second show, only at the end realizing she must have seen the same thing twice. But time had passed—that was all she wanted—and she rose with the crowd and went out to the car. The clock on the dash told her it was midnight. Good enough, she thought. If she drove slowly it could be nearly one by the time she got there. Joe would be frantic, searching the shore. Inquiring of the neighbours? A qualm of misgiving went through her. But, no, she would just come in, calm as you please, saying, "Why, were you worried? I was just out at the movies." As if she went every night in the week.

Now and then impatience possessed her and she pressed down on the accelerator, only to slow up after a moment. No, no, let him suffer, let him know what it was to feel the terrible ache that she felt. The main street at last, then the lane, past Mrs. Hildon's, past Mrs. Wake's—all dark. Her own house was lighted as if there were a party—oh, yes, she had left the lights on and Joe would never have put them out. She turned in, drove up to the garage, got out and opened the doors, put the car in. Surely Joe would have heard all this.

In the house, she stared round at the empty, silent kitchen. She went through to the hall, the sitting-room. She called. There was no answer. She ran out through the pantry and

down the hall of the servants' quarters to the back door. She opened it silently and looked across through the apple trees towards Mrs. Wake's, even as she did so hearing the sound of music, voices, laughter. She turned away, closed the door and came slowly back. Joe had not even missed her. Like someone walking in her sleep, she went from room to room, turning out lights. She mounted the stairs, her feet dragging, stumbled into her own room, conscious now of nothing but the terrible fatigue that had come over her. She was just too old for this sort of thing. Too old. It was all she could do to get properly to bed, and once there, sleep hit her like a blow.

15

WITH THE morning a degree of calm came to Miss Eva, though there was still a heavy weight, almost physical in its intensity, pressing down on her. The thing to do now, she decided as she dressed, was to go down as if she knew nothing, wait and see what Joe would say. Give him a chance? He had no chance, the evidence was too clear. But just the same, she would not let him see that there was any difference in her. Pride, all she had left, would have to sustain her.

When she came to the kitchen, she found he had come down long before her, for she out of pure weariness had slept later than usual. He greeted her with his usual good spirits. "Hi there, sweet slugabed. I thought you'd never come down." He poured her coffee and served her, then came and sat opposite her. He had eaten long ago, he said.

It was then that Miss Eva noticed for the first time that he was dressed as if for town. It was his day off—she had quite forgotten.

As if he had seen her glance, Joe said, "It's so wonderful and cool this morning I thought I'd run in to Boston if you don't mind."

"Of course not." Relief spread through her. That would give her time, time to think things out more clearly, time to cover her hurt.

"Thought I'd drop in on the Whitmans, maybe spend the night if you can manage without me." He gave her an inquiring glance.

"Of course. I'll be fine." All the better. She needed two days alone to get back to herself again.

"They've been awfully decent really and last time I was in I promised that I'd come for a real visit sometime."

"Yes, you should do that."

"After all," Joe said with a smile, "but for them I'd never have landed here. So I figure I owe them quite a lot."

Miss Eva was even able to say, "And so do I," to take, as lightly as it was given, the kiss he left on her cheek. She was able to stand at the window and wave him a gay good-bye. At least he was away from that horrid girl for forty-eight hours.

The first day went quickly. Clara was there cleaning, and Miss Eva worked along with her as she had not done in a long time, seeing to it that everything was done just right. In the evening she went early to bed to make up for the loss of sleep the night before. She would not let herself think of Joe, or puzzle over what, if anything, she was going to do about him. Let time come between, let distance separate her from the blow and any action she might take.

It was not till the next morning when she was coming in from the mailbox, that, glancing across at Mrs. Wake's house, she was struck by the closed look of the wing that jutted out toward her own back garden. She put suspicion aside, however, and went on into the house to sit down and look over her mail. Nothing of interest save a brief note from one of Brother Henry's girls who wrote her a duty letter now and then. She meant nothing to either of those girls; life had not brought them close in any way or made them necessary to each other. The other letters were just the usual appeals for money, announcements, advertisements, and a note from the Boston firm saying that the seat covers were ready and could be called for at her convenience. She stacked the letters in a desk cubbyhole and wandered unhappily about the house. She could not bring herself to think or to plan. Perhaps the best thing, after all, was just to wait and see. Daphne would be leaving soon and everything would have to be settled one way

or another by then. She was too worn out with it to do anything, herself. And at least, she thought again, Joe for the moment was out of that brazen hussy's clutches.

She woke from her nap feeling better than she had since Mrs. Starling's visit, her mind more clear and active. More suspicious. For almost instantly it came to her with a sense of complete conviction that Joe was not at the Whitmans', had had no intention of going there. She paced the floor. If there were only some way of knowing, knowing for sure. If he really had gone there, then she might perhaps some day be able to trust him again. If not— But how could she tell? Quite suddenly it came to her—the seat covers, a perfect excuse. A moment later she was on the phone, giving Mr. Whitman's home number, trying to keep her voice steady and not too breathless. When Mrs. Whitman answered—she had an unmistakable nasal voice—Miss Eva explained, with what she thought was reasonable coherence, that she wanted Joe to pick up some seat covers and could she please have a word with him about it?

"But he isn't here, Miss Iverson. The scamp promised he'd come for a bit of a visit sometime but we haven't seen him since early summer. If he does come in later today, I'll certainly tell him. Seat covers, did you say?"

"It isn't important, but I thought while he had the car in town . . . he can do it some other time . . . no matter . . . and if he does come in, never mind, don't mention it to him . . . it'll be too late . . . the shop closed . . . thank you so much." At last the receiver was down. She sat there staring before her.

Well, now you know. I hope you're satisfied, she told herself. She went to her room, lay down across her bed and stared up at the ceiling till darkness came and she could see nothing. It was when she was in the kitchen making herself a sandwich that it occurred to her that something might have happened, there might have been an accident. Joe might even now be lying unconscious in some hospital. No, no, you fool, looking for some way out. But couldn't he have changed his mind, gone up on the North Shore, maybe, to see that girl who had brought him to this part of the country in the first

place? She was only a name, a vague image in Miss Eva's mind, and so the thought was not so disturbing as it might have been, had she been next door. What more natural than that Joe on sudden impulse had decided to see her once more? In just a friendly way. It could be. Anything was better than thinking of his being with that brassy-haired hard little piece.

Miss Eva stiffened as a new thought struck her. Maybe he was with her! She ran through the servants' ell as she had gone once before, opened the door and blinked till her eyes became accustomed to the darkness. There was no sign of light in the back of Mrs. Wake's house. But the girl might be in the living-room with Mrs. Wake. Well, there was just one way to find out.

"Why, come right in, Miss Eva," Mrs. Wake cried when she opened the door and found her there, hesitant, about to knock again, for there had been no immediate response to her first rap. "I'm awfully glad to see you."

"I just dropped by to ask how the book-and-flower sale went," Miss Eva said, following her through the tiny hall, thinking, What a liar I am getting to be!

"Wonderful. We made over twenty-five dollars. Come on in and have a cup of tea. Daffy and I were just enjoying one and it'll be lovely to have you. You get in so seldom. You know my Daphne," she added.

Such relief, such self-reproach swept through Miss Eva that she found herself being almost over cordial, in spite of the indifferent nod with which the girl acknowledged her arrival. Mrs. Wake got an extra cup—why didn't she let Daphne run out for it? Miss Eva wondered—poured the tea, talking all the while. Daphne, sitting like a lump on a log, gulped her tea and took the last of what must have been quite a platter of sandwiches without so much as offering it to anyone else. Not that she wanted it, Miss Eva told herself as she murmured a word or two in response to Mrs. Wake's chatter. And she could forgive the girl her bad manners, forgive her almost anything—that did not have to do with Joe—because at least she was here, she was not in Boston with him.

"Feel better now, honey?" Mrs. Wake asked at last, turning to her young protégé. Daphne only nodded, lost in some

thought of her own, and a not too pleasant one, judging by the sulky look on her face. "Two days in town take it out of even the young." Mrs. Wake laughed. "As for me, I come home utterly exhausted. And Daffy here looked all in when she came off the bus. That bus, really, it is a trial, so slow——"

But Miss Eva was not listening. Two days in Boston? Then it was true, her worst fears were confirmed. She might have guessed at first sight—the girl was properly dressed tonight, in a navy suit, rather shabby, but more decent than the shorts and slacks she usually went around in.

"But wasn't it nice," Mrs. Wake was running on, "that she didn't have to take the bus in? That Joe, I declare, he's the most obliging chap. Just happened to come along in the car and he picked her up at the corner where she was waiting for the bus, took her all the way in."

"Oh, yes, that was nice," Miss Eva managed to say. Happened to come along indeed, she thought with fury. It was all planned, every bit of it, the two days, the night—she fairly choked with anger.

"Honey, tell Miss Eva about your interview. I'm sure she would be interested in hearing about the job you're going to have for next winter."

It was the last thing in the world Miss Eva cared to hear about but she made herself say, "Why, yes, by all means. Only I thought you were still in school."

"Oh, I am," the girl said and it seemed for a moment as if that was all she was going to say. No manners at all, Miss Eva thought. Just an impossible creature. But after a moment Daphne went on, "In this course I'm taking we have a term of actual hotel experience, get a regular job and all, see?"

No one had ever said "See?" to Miss Eva in just that tone and she was about to reply rather icily when Mrs. Wake broke in, "That was what she had to go into town for."

"Yeah," Daphne said, seeming to gather a little more interest now, in talking about her own affairs, "I had to see this bird from Cornell, the one that decides on placement and all that and I talked him into giving me the choice job of the lot. I didn't have such luck with Joe, though," she added, her red lower lip in a pout.

"Joe?" Miss Eva echoed.

"Yeah, he's a natural for the hotel business with that slick manner of his. Manager, that's what he ought to be. I've been telling him he ought to get into it, go on to Cornell and take the courses. Says he has no money, and less taste for it, the dope. He wants his money handed to him on a silver platter. But he'd like it once he got started and he could work his way through. Look at me. That's what I'm doing." She was animated enough now, her dark eyes flashing, her very hair seemed to stand up stiffer in its tight little curls as she spoke.

"Indeed?" said Miss Eva. Just a scheme, a scheme to get Joe away, to have him near her. Oh, the girl was utterly transparent—and shameless.

"But will he listen to me, the fathead?" She shook her curls furiously. "I might as well talk to the wind." She gave Miss Eva a shrewd glance. "But he might listen to you. He thinks you were made and handed down."

"Oh?" So they had discussed her, had they? Well, at least Joe had stood up for her, had let this girl know what he thought of her. "I'm sure I wouldn't presume to tell any man what he ought to do with his life, least of all Joe. He is so independent——"

"Independent? That guy? Don't make me laugh."

"But he is," Miss Eva cried with indignation. "Why, the first thing he said to me that first morning was that he didn't want me helping him out as a favour to the Whitmans; he wanted it to be strictly on his own merits." She could see him now, standing there, facing her in the kitchen.

Daphne laughed. "He just talks that way because he knows damn well he's no more independent than a breast-fed baboon. Oh, he's got the wool pulled over your eyes all right. No wonder he thinks you're perfect." She spat the word out as if it were an epithet. "Addlepatid idiot. He'd think anybody perfect that thought him so."

Mrs. Wake laughed. "At least you don't have any illusions about him, honey," she said. "Lord, how different from my day! If a good-looking chap like Joe had turned an eye on me I'd have thought he was right out of heaven."

"Illusions! We've got no time for illusions in this day. God, that's one handicap I've missed. I see him for what he is—lazy as hell, a jolly little liar, and out for what he can get."

"But you love him just the same." Mrs. Wake laughed indulgently.

Miss Eva said stiffly, "I don't see how anyone could love a man who answered to that description."

Daphne neither denied nor acknowledged that, she just sat glowering. But Miss Eva had had all she could take. She thanked Mrs. Wake for the tea, said she was glad to have good news of the book-and-flower sale, and escaped while she could still keep her temper under control.

She did not go straight home—she felt as if the house would stifle her. She went instead down the little path to the shore to walk back and forth there, cooling her anger. Somehow she must get Joe out of the clutches of that designing hussy. Not for her own sake but for his, she told herself. Why, Joe, so sensitive and gentle, would be letting himself in for a life of pure misery with such a person as that. It would be his ruin. Oh, she would give him up to a noble soul any minute, she told herself, to someone fine and sweet who would not misjudge him so. But to a girl like this—

Misjudge him? Miss Eva stopped short, stood there on the marshy shore, her eyes on the blinking light at Gurnet. Had the girl misjudged him? Of course not. She had told Daphne that she did not see how anyone could love such a man. But I love him, she said to herself with a sob; I love him no matter what he is. How—how humiliating, how degrading! Yet surely any real emotion was worthy of respect. And one did not love for moral qualities, one loved for tenderness and gaiety and sweet thoughtfulness—all those things that Joe had. They bound her to him, she could not escape now, she was too deeply involved. If she must suffer for it—well, perhaps one had to pay for every good thing in this world.

Besides, she thought as she turned homeward, Joe wasn't lazy—look how he worked over the car, keeping it so beautifully. He wasn't out for what he could get—he gave far more than he got from her. And as for his being a liar—well, if he lied, it was to save her from being hurt. Oh, if she could only

tell him that, should he have to get himself involved with people like this girl, the only way to soften the blow was not to lie about it, but to tell the whole truth openly, with no reserve. For it was the being tricked that hurt worst of all. Strange that it should be like that. No, maybe it was not so strange after all. Was not confidence, rather than faithfulness, the basic ingredient? She wished she could somehow make Joe understand that. But could a man, ever?

She had a chance next day to try, at least, to make Joe understand. But she found she had to lie, to lie as heartily and thoroughly, she thought, as Joe had ever lied to her. When he came down to breakfast which she had all ready for him, she could see that he was a bit disgruntled, disturbed about something. She didn't help him out, she just waited to see what he would say. It was when they had finished eating and were having their second cup of coffee that he lighted cigarettes for them both, tilted back his chair and said, "Sorry about the seat covers. I didn't get to the Whitmans' till around dinnertime and it was too late then, of course."

"That didn't matter. I just thought——" She puffed at her cigarette, left the phrase unfinished. Would he have told her anything if he had not gone to the Whitmans' later and found out that she knew he was not there? She waited in almost unbearable suspense for him to go on.

"You see," he said, getting up for more coffee, "I ran into this kid from next door—she was bound for Boston too—picked her up and ran her in. Lord," he went on, sitting down again, "how I hate a managing woman! She's been after me to go into the hotel business of all things, and nothing would do but I must promise to drop in and see this guy in the afternoon when she'd got through her interview—about a sort of practice job the college arranges for. So, well, just to pacify her, I did. He was at the Statler. We had a bite to eat together and went up to his room. Not a bad chap, but it sounded like a tough course, even if I'd been keen on it."

"Not at all your sort of thing," Miss Eva agreed. But imagine, that girl, in a hotel bedroom with two men! At the same time she could feel nothing but relief. At least this time Joe was telling her all about it.

"Well, we had some beers sent up and the first thing I knew it was much too late to go barging in at the Whitmans'. So I just went round to the Y and got me a room for the night. And say, I wish you'd seen the movie we went to yesterday afternoon—that's why I was so late at the Whitmans'. You would have laughed—it was one of those English movies. If it comes down this way I must take you to see it. One of the funniest I ever saw."

"I'll watch the papers for it," Miss Eva agreed. "I love to hear what you do when you are away. About the girls you are with and—and everything. Only I do wish this girl were a bit more—more *comme il faut*. She seems so—crude."

Joe gave her a teasing look. "Not jealous, are you?" And he straightened his tie as if preening himself, as if to show how pleased he would be to have two women fighting over him.

"Of course not. The idea!" Miss Eva cried with indignation.

"O.K., O.K., don't take my head off." He laughed. "You know damn well you've got a place of your own with me that nobody can touch."

Miss Eva looked at him with hope, with gratitude. She had to believe him when he spoke like that.

"These tomatoes—they don't mean a thing to me. It's just I like to be young and foolish sometimes. As for this Daffy gal, all I do is fight with her. But if you like to hear about it, that's O.K. by me. You know I wouldn't do anything to hurt you, not for the world, honey."

"You couldn't hurt me, Joe." Miss Eva laughed. Oh, what a liar she was! "I'm old and tough, tough as—as the horn-beam tree."

"Well, just don't ever get tough with me, that's all I ask. And now, what do you say we run over to Brockton and let you take your driver's test? You've been ready for it for months."

THAT LITTLE talk with Joe had its consequences. Was it really better to know than just to suspect, Miss Eva began to wonder as the days went by? Especially as Joe seemed to feel now that there was no restraint upon him, that it was all settled he could run over every night after dinner to see Daphne. "The kid's lonesome," he would say apologetically sometimes, or "You O.K.? Got something good to read?" But the most trying thing of all was that Daphne, since the evening of Miss Eva's visit to Mrs. Wake, apparently felt that she had the freedom of the house. She would come barging in in her breezy way, saying, "Hi, Miss Eva," and then ignore her completely while she chattered away with Joc. Miss Eva came out to the kitchen more than once and found her wiping the dishes for him. "Just helping this lazy bum get through so we can make the first show at the movies," she would say. Or she would make no apology whatever for her presence and if Miss Eva was in the room, she would walk out with only a nod in her direction, saying to Joe, "Come on, dope, you promised to fix the lock on my suitcase, remember?"

It was true that Joe never failed to ask Miss Eva to come along to the movies with them. He'd say he didn't know what was on but she might like it. Or as he went out he'd tell her he'd be home early. But Miss Eva found that small comfort, and there were times when she could scarcely conceal her chagrin. Joe, usually so quick to sense her mood, usually so sensitive to catch her very thought, seemed singularly obtuse now. It was as if his preoccupation with Daphne had, without his realizing it, closed him off from Miss Eva.

She remembered with bitterness Mrs. Hildon's phrase, at their last bridge-club meeting, "Youth calling to youth," and a deep sadness came over her, a sense of hopelessness. She could do nothing against the terrible, the irreversible years of which she was the victim. She felt as if her life were over. That Joe had no conception of her despair was at once a relief and an added pain. Even in that order, that secret life, he

seemed unaware of any change in her, and on those rare nights when, as he promised, he came home early, if there were tears in her eyes he did not see them in the darkness. There were times when Miss Eva felt she could not go on, that she must speak and reveal the torment she was undergoing. And, again, she tried to separate the physical from the—was it the spiritual side of their relationship?—to keep the two distinct, saying to herself, Well, at least I have this; why not take it as something wholly apart, a happening that has nothing to do with the way I feel otherwise? A man could do that. Certainly Joe by his own confession could be as casual as—as an alley cat. Why couldn't she? But she felt degraded by the very effort, she felt drawn into something unworthy of herself. No matter what others might do, she decided at last, for her, it was only where there was a communion, an exaltation of spirit as well as of body, that she could find justification, release, pure delight.

She awoke one morning late in August to feel the first hint of autumn in the air. With it came a change of spirit. I've been a fool, she told herself with sudden fury. A meek old fool. Why should I just sit back and take what comes? Am I become less than nothing, that I should let a common, crude, brazen little chit come between me and something rare and beautiful and wonderful? Am I, Eva Iveson, going to go down without a struggle? Here I've been sitting around quoting Mrs. Hildon's 'Youth calling to youth!' What of the youth in me? The Ivesons don't give up. What of Captain Iveson at Valley Forge and Ebenezer who fell at Antietam? It took a Minié ball through his heart to knock him down. I've had one too, a different sort, but I can still stand and fight. I won't let that girl have Joe no matter what Joe is. I'm the one he really cares about. This—this fascination with her is just a small, a temporary thing, unless I let it go on and on to become more. Do something, she told herself. What are ancestors for? What's a fine inheritance worth, if you let it dribble and drool away in despair and submission? But my ancestors never got themselves into a state like this. How do you know they didn't? Where's your backbone? Gone to water—my bones are as water, she answered herself, her heart failing for a moment.

Then just walk out of the house and quietly drown in the bay, she retorted. Jabber, jabber, whisper, whisper all over town: Miss Eva Iveson, victim of temporary insanity, drowns in the bay. I won't drown. Besides the tide is out. I'd only get stuck in the mud and be put in a home for the feeble-minded.

She went on and on, arguing with herself, two people in one, at war with each other.

Well, there's the ocean. Get in the car and drive out, deeper and deeper. It's cold. Besides, that's running away. Then stand and fight. How? How have women fought through the ages? With their wits and wiles. And their bodies, too. How, with their bodies? By making them more attractive, by care, by ornament and all the available aids to beauty.

She sprang out of bed, closed the window with a bang and began to get dressed. She had suddenly remembered something Mrs. Wake said long ago, before Joe came. It was that day Mrs. Hildon told about buying two suits just alike. "Why," Mrs. Wake had said, "if Miss Eva would just fix herself up——" Well, she wasn't going to fix herself up according to Mrs. Wake's ideas. But something could be done about it. That would be her first step. After that, she would think of something else. She would fight for what she wanted.

When she came downstairs for breakfast, she was dressed for town, hat on, gloves and purse in hand. Joe, getting breakfast, for her preparations had made her later than usual, looked at her in amazement. "I'm going into town today, Joe," she told him. "I've a bit of shopping to do."

He hesitated only a moment before saying, "Why, of course, Miss Eva. I'll get ready as soon as we've eaten, and drive you in."

"No, I'd rather drive myself. I know, I've never driven in town, but it would be good experience for me and I'm quite capable of it."

"I'd better be along, though, just in case."

But Miss Eva was quite decided about it. She would be depending on him if he were beside her. She preferred to go alone. So, though with evident uneasiness, Joe had to agree. He got the car out for her, made sure there was plenty of petrol, helped her in.

"Thank you very much," Miss Eva said in her crispest manner, turning on the ignition, pressing the starter.

"Let her warm up a minute," Joe said. Then, arms resting on the open window, he looked in at her, grinning, his eyes alight with an interest, with an awareness of her that he had not shown in weeks. "You're back on a high horse this morning."

It was a sign, Miss Eva thought, not missing that spark in his eyes, and her spirits rose. "When I bought the car, you told me it had more than one horsepower."

Joe laughed. "There's power aplenty. In you, as well as the car. Just be careful, though, won't you? Take it easy, go slow."

"I'll obey the traffic laws, whenever it seems necessary. Don't worry. I may be a bit late getting home."

"But I will worry. I can't help it. I don't like it a bit, your driving——"

"See here, you must remember I got along a good many years without your supervision——"

He leaned nearer. "Wasn't much fun, was it?"

Miss Eva laughed. "Frankly, no. Now will you get away from the car or shall I run over you?"

"I wouldn't put it past you," Joe said, but he stepped away. When she had backed around and was starting ahead again, he said, "Take care now—I'll be worrying my head off all day, thinking about you."

Miss Eva only smiled and waved. That was just what she wanted, to have him thinking about her all day. Oh, she was on the right track at last, thank heaven! She was on her high horse again, as Joe had said with such relish. Again? What did that mean? Could it be that these weeks when she had been so tormented, so distraught, he had missed the old spirited way she had once had; that, bewildered by the change, he had turned to other company? Well, that was over now. Things were going to be different after today.

She had a few qualms about her driving when she turned the car into the main highway. She was tempted to drive no farther than the next town where she could get out, park the car and wait for the midmorning bus. But that would give her little time for all she had in mind to do, and, too, she

would have to wait for the shops to deliver her bundles and she was too impatient for that. No, she would go on. She could do it. She could do anything.

In fact, she thought she had done about everything by the time she arrived at the parking garage in town. She had been down two one-way streets; she had got confused at a traffic circle, entered it the wrong way and felt for a while that she would never escape; she had taken the wrong lane and only with great difficulty had got over to make the right turn; and to add to her discomfort, the day which had been delightfully cool when she left home was now, in town, muggy and oppressively warm. But nothing could damp her spirits.

She hailed a taxi and went first to S. S. Pierce's. There she ordered all manner of delicacies such as she had not indulged in since Papa's death—imported cheeses, pickled artichokes, potted pheasant, as well as more everyday viands. If the way to a man's heart was what it was said to be, she told herself, she was hellbent down the highway towards her destination.

The hairdresser's? No, she decided, heading up the street, shopping first, on the principle that a garment becoming at one's worst and most bedraggled, would be even more becoming after a facial and a proper hair-do. She was going to have everything new, from the skin out, and she would gladly have renewed that, had it been possible. In her favourite shop she asked for and, thanks to her air of quiet authority, got the services of the most experienced corsetière. "I want something to minimize the bad points"—she indicated her waist line—"and exaggerate the good. At my age the figure is all one has left." Not quite all, she thought with a faint smile, but it was just as well to give the woman a sense of the importance of her task, and she added, "Eyes weaken, teeth decay, ears fail, skin wrinkles, flesh flabbies. The figure alone remains within control."

Miss Eva had not been properly fitted to what was called a foundation garment in many years, having been content to order according to a few measurements. It was amazing to her, the strides that had been made in recent years. And when at last she herself was satisfied, she felt elated out of all proportion when her fitter called in the head of the depart-

ment to see the result. "It is not every woman of your age, madame, who has a figure like that," was her comment.

In the lingerie department, Miss Eva, turning over a pile of night-dresses that had been got out for her inspection, said, "No, none of these. I want something gay but discreet." The salesgirl stared at her for a moment blankly, then, with a faint shake of the head, produced a box of diaphanous nylons which apparently depended on an abundance of fine pleating for what degree of discretion they offered. Miss Eva chose the black and the cherry red.

"For yourself, madame?"

"Certainly." Does she think I am shopping for a granddaughter? Miss Eva retorted mentally.

"I was only asking for size," the girl apologized.

When she had finished in that department, Miss Eva went on to the suits and dresses. She found a lovely grey-blue raw-silk suit which she decided to wear in place of her too-warm navy serge. Then in the "Southern Wear" department she became quite reckless among the charming, backless cottons and lincens which were surprisingly becoming. She made sure that each one had a small jacket, however, in case courage failed her when it came to the wearing of them. She arranged to have everything sent to the car at the garage—there was nothing like a little folding money, as Joe called it, for getting one's wishes carried out promptly. Then after a milk shake and a sandwich at the Thompson's Spa near by she took a taxi to the hairdresser's.

She had no appointment but again she found that the way opened when she opened her purse. There was a little consultation between the woman at the desk and the manager, after which Miss Eva was told that Pierre would take care of her. Pierre, Miss Eva thought with a smile, remembering Mama and Paris and the open barouche. Perhaps that was a good omen.

Pierre proved to be a man with ideas. Miss Eva, somewhat worn out by the long drive and her morning's activities, decided to put herself completely in his hands. "Something neat," she stipulated, however, tucking back a stray lock of her soft brown hair, "and suitable. No permanent, no cutting,

but different, wholly different." With that she leaned back, glad of a brief rest, and allowed herself to be worked on without interference. By now she was really too tired to give it much thought, and she welcomed the suggestion of a facial while her hair was drying after the shampoo.

The result, when at last Pierre whipped off the bibs and aprons in which she had been swathed, and turned her chair so she could observe it in the mirror, was amazing. He had drawn her hair up and back showing her well-set ears, and had made a coil on the crown of her head, allowing one soft lock to fall across her forehead. The application of lipstick and colour to her cheeks made a difference, too, most flattering in the rosy light of the small room.

"Madame has dropped ten years, if I may say so," Pierre murmured, rubbing his hands with satisfaction. Then he took up a bottle from the table and sprayed the whole coiffure with some liquid. "So it will not blow out of place, madame," he said.

Miss Eva leaned forward, looking more closely. "But I had some grey," she began.

"Very little. I touched up the streaks with our new preparation, not really a dye. It can be washed out, but it would be a shame not to keep it so, madame. Every two weeks is all that is necessary. It makes all the difference. Now if madame will permit, we have something recently put on the market, a sort of dressing for the hair——"

Miss Eva, being in a yielding mood and quite bewildered by the amazing change in her appearance, emerged from the shop with an armload of preparations, including some delightful bath salts and a small bottle of extremely expensive perfume. But this was no time to think of cost, she reminded herself as she hailed a taxi and gave the name of her garage.

Her packages had arrived by special messenger, the garage man told her, and thanks to the tip she had given in advance, her car was on the ground floor, ready for her. The traffic, she found when she was out on the street, was thicker than any she had ever before encountered—it was the after-five rush hour when everyone in the city, it seemed, was mad to get home. Well, so was she, Miss Eva thought, and plunged

into it with a feeling of reckless invulnerability. There floated before her the vision of herself as she had appeared in the rosy-lighted, many-mirrored little room at the hairdresser's—a woman not quite young and yet with the effect of youth, finely cut, aristocratic features, dignified without stiffness, and above all with a look of eager expectancy, of hope, of life itself. Really, almost glamorous.

It was not until she had reached the shore road that she began to be conscious of her weariness. Excitement had borne her up till then and she had been expecting the road to be more open along here. If anything it was more crowded than the city streets. The warm day had brought literally thousands to park, or to try to find a parking place, alongshore, and the beach itself was a mass of humanity. One car swerved out of line to dodge a careless pedestrian. Miss Eva, turning to escape it, got the late sun in her eyes and narrowly missed another car trying to pass on her right. In the ensuing mix-up she found herself bumping along with two wheels in the sand on the other side of the kerb. There was no harm done, luckily, but she was utterly unnerved by the experience and at the first opportunity turned into the parking lot that extended for some distance along the side of the road. She came to a stop, all of a tremble, she covered her face with her hands and sat there, in a cold sweat. By sheer good luck she had escaped a bad crash, but she did not know how she would ever have the courage to get back into that vicious traffic again. Or the strength. She was really too tired.

After a while she dropped her hands from her face, straightened up. The last rays of the sun struck her with blinding brightness and she reached up, turned down the sun visor on the windshield. One of the new little gadgets about the car which Joe had pointed out to her with pride was the mirror on the back of each of the visors, and now Miss Eva found herself confronted with her own reflection. She could not believe it. Was this the same woman whose image at the hairdresser's had so delighted her? The bright light showed up the tiny crowsfeet around her eyes, the lines about her mouth, the sharp tendons of her throat. Her mouth was a harsh red line; the rouge on her cheeks was garish, cruelly

false; her hair, darker than it had ever been, had a hard set line, without any redeeming softness, cruelly unbecoming. This was an old woman she was looking at. Worse, an old woman who was trying to look young. "You poor pathetic old fool!" Miss Eva said at last. She slapped up the sun visor with an angry gesture saying, "You goddam idiot, get to hell out of my sight!" Like Brother Henry's profanity in his last years, hers was a despairing protest against the inevitable, but small comfort. Oh, she could not go home looking like this, she thought in panic. At that moment a shadow fell across the seat and she looked round to see a young man in the sort of khaki uniform a petrol attendant wears. He was staring at her in some alarm. Thinks I'm crazy, sitting here swearing at myself, Miss Eva thought.

"Sorry, lady," he said, "but this—here parking space is reserved for folks using the bathhouse."

Miss Eva looked around for the first time. Sure enough she was in a partially closed-off place near to a long low building with a sign, BATHING SUITS FOR HIRE. She made up her mind without hesitation. "But that's just where I am going."

A few minutes later in a ruffy cotton bathing suit of quite indecent cut Miss Eva was walking across the sand, weaving her way with determined step through the swarms of people who lay on the beach or strolled along it. She was aware of curious glances as she walked out into the shallow water with no cap protecting her elaborate coiffure, so evidently straight from the hands of the hairdresser. But she did not care, she had but one thought in her mind. A breaker came rolling in and she plunged into it headfirst. She swam a way out, then, turning on her back, lay there relaxed in the blessedly cool cleansing water, her hair streaming out, dozens of small wire hairpins loosening, drifting downward. She lifted her hands, scooping up water to scrub her cheeks, her lips. What was that line from *Macbeth*—the multitudinous seas incarnadine, making the green one red? The murder she had attempted was the murder of herself, her own true self, as she really was. Oh, what a mistake! she thought, looking up at the pale evening sky where a few clouds still held the rosy glow of sunset. She had to win or lose on her own merits, her own

virtues. The thought brought a measure of peace to her, of acceptance of what was ahead, no matter what.

When she came ashore, she was shivering from the cold water, the evening air struck her like an icy blast, but she felt purified, washed clean. She gave the girl in the bath house a tip that was much too large and, at her astonished look, said, "It was worth it, and more."

"Yes, ma'am, it's really been a scorcher today," the girl said and handed her a towel that smelled faintly of disinfectant.

Miss Eva dried her hair as well as she could, salvaged enough hairpins to fasten it in the usual knot at the nape of her neck and got dressed, thankful that her customary good taste had been with her when she bought this new silk suit. Joe might not even notice that it was different from the blue serge in which she had driven away this morning. Back in the car she wished for the warmth of that old blue suit. Even with the windows closed and the heat turned on, she was still cold, chilled to the very bone. Luckily the peak of the evening traffic was now passed and she drove home without the difficulty she had anticipated.

Coming down the lane at last, she hoped that Joe would be next door, that she would not have to see him tonight. She was thoroughly exhausted, wanted nothing but to crawl into bed with a hot-water bottle. But turning in at her own drive, the first thing she saw was Joe, walking back and forth in front of the garage. At sight of her headlights he ran to meet her, flung open the car door before she had come to a full stop.

"Thank heaven you're home! I was about wild. A minute more and I'd have been calling the police and all the hospitals."

"Why, Joe, my dear, you shouldn't have worried so. I was all right." But what balm to her spirit his anxiety was! All sense of fatigue left her, though; the east breeze that rustled in the leafy branches of the hornbeam tree overhead sent a shiver through her.

Joe, still grumbling over what a miserable time he had had, followed her into the kitchen, and when he saw her under the light, said, "Lord, you look frozen! Come along with you," and he fairly swept her into the library where he settled her in the big chair, started the fire and hurried to get her a drink.

She laughed, protested, but half-heartedly. What she needed was warmth, inside and out, and when Joe ordered her, "Drink it all down straight," she did as she was told. "That's better," she said gratefully, handing him the empty glass.

"Probably didn't eat a thing all day," he went on scolding her.

"Oh, yes, I did."

"What?" He stood there on the rug before her, glaring down at her fiercely.

"Well, I had a milk shake and——"

"A milk-shake. I could milk-shake you till your teeth fall out. Now you just sit there and I'll bring you some decent food."

"Thank you, Joe." Miss Eva leaned back and closed her eyes. This was pure heaven, to have Joe fussing at her, taking care of her. She asked nothing more. They seemed all at once to be back where they had been in the spring, on the same easy footing, no constraint between them, only warmth and affection. Was it just because she had given him a few anxious hours, or was it because something had happened while she was away?

The answer to that question did not come till after they had eaten and Joe had come back from cleaning up the kitchen, and there were fresh drinks and a bottle on the table between them. "This is more like it," he said, seating himself with a sigh of satisfaction.

"What sort of a day did you have, Joe?" Miss Eva inquired after a little.

His face clouded, he gave a short laugh without any merriment in it. "Oh, I just fussed around the house and——" He was silent a moment, his eyes on the fire. Then he turned to her as if he had suddenly decided to make a clean breast of things. "Had a fearful row with that little she-devil next door. Lord, will I be glad when she kicks the dust of this place from her heels and clears out tomorrow morning!" He leaned back in his chair and took a long pull at his drink.

"Tomorrow? She's going—so soon?" That was the best news yet. They had quarrelled often enough before, and made up, but if she were leaving——

"Yes, and none too soon to suit me." He set down his glass with a bang that nearly broke it, got down on his knees before the fire and began to poke it savagely.

Too savagely? Miss Eva wondered. Would he be so upset over the girl if he didn't care anything about her? But that thought was gone as quickly as it had come. Joe was himself again, he was here again. Happiness swept through her, a wild mad happiness which she could scarcely contain.

"Women, I hate them," Joe went on. "Always trying to run things, telling you what to do—a young chit like that, can you beat it? What does she know? Makes me sick and tired. I won't stand for it—and I told her so. Why, she even had the nerve to light into you."

"Me?" Miss Eva cried.

"Yes, you. Said you were ruining me, sapping my manhood." He laughed. "That's a good one. Called me a parasite and a gigolo. Oh, she went at both of us, tooth and nail."

"Ridiculous."

"That's what I told her. We're through all right, you can bet on that. She went too far this time. Damn her, the self-righteous little bitch! . . . I'm sorry."

"You'd better be. You shouldn't talk like that." But every word was sweet to her ears and she could not make her tone severe.

He jabbed at the logs. "Oh, forget her, forget her. She isn't worth thinking about." Then still on his knees, he turned and looked up at Miss Eva. "Don't you see, honey, you've ruined me for these young things, so immature, so opinionated, so utterly unreasonable? I could never take up with one of them after knowing you."

Miss Eva felt the tears spring to her eyes, tears of pure delight. She could only look down at him with tenderness. Then after a little, on sudden impulse, feeling secure now, the long ache eased, she said, "Joe, you've told me about your day. Now I'll tell you about mine." And she did, even to the cleansing swim in the ocean. For now it seemed far away, as if it had happened to someone else. She could even see how funny it really was, though not yet able really to laugh about it.

Joe, still on his knees before the fire, listened without a word, though now and then he turned to look at her, to shake his head helplessly. When she had finished he sat back on his heels and studied her for a long moment in silence. Then he said gently, "You silly old thing," and the words had no sting in them. And he added, with wonderful sincerity in his tone, "Honey, if you could just see yourself once, as you look to me!"

That was all, but it was enough, the way he said it.

17

THE SUMMER was definitely over now, an early frost had come. The marshes overnight turned bronze and gold, the high-bush blueberries were garnet, the chokeberries were lighted up from within like lanterns among the rusty pines. Swamp maples were aflame, the sumac clumps a whirl of scarlet, oaks were taking on a russet tinge, and Miss Eva's hornbeam tree, which for the last few weeks had shown a scattering of bright leaves as if a flock of redbirds had settled there, was now at the height of its autumn brilliance. It was really going out in glory, Miss Eva thought, standing by the windows in her bedroom where she was getting dressed for the first bridge-club meeting of the year. Yes, the old tree was having a final fling at life, a defiance perhaps, dashed in the teeth of winter and the gales that would soon strip and leave it bare. It had saved the best for the last. Like me, Miss Eva thought, turning away, getting on with her dressing.

For these weeks since Daphne left had been pure heaven to Miss Eva. She had never felt so easy, so sure, never before had she felt so completely in harmony with Joe. This was his day off, and—how like him, Miss Eva thought now with a tender smile—when Mrs. Hildon had phoned in great distress to see if he could make her balky car start in time to get the last batch of grandchildren to the early train, he had volunteered to take them all the way in to the South Station. "But on one condition, Mrs. Hildon," he had told her over

the phone. "I want Peter to sit next to me." While he was friends with all the children, he had taken a great fancy to that curly-headed blond six-year-old, singled him out to romp with whenever the children's play had brought them down the lane. Was it because the child reminded him of the little boy he had left down in Louisiana? Miss Eva wondered as she fastened Mama's garnet brooch at the V of her blouse. How strange life was! She went to the closet for her coat. And cruel too, she thought, seeing there on a high shelf the pile of boxes, still unopened, which represented her day of shopping in Boston. What was she going to do with all those things? Give them to the Girl Scouts' used-clothing sale, perhaps.

She was the first to arrive at Mrs. Starling's where the bridge club was to meet that afternoon, and as she settled herself in the old Boston rocker, which was the most comfortable of the chairs in Mrs. Starling's wholly unmodernized parlour, she could not help but notice that her hostess seemed ill at ease. She fluttered about the room like some old brown bird that couldn't find the right limb to light on, she straightened the row of pewter plates on the mantelpiece, brushed a bit of imaginary dust from a daguerreotype on the whatnot, rearranged the folds of the brown velour curtains at the window. Finally she came and poked up the fire, her back to Miss Eva.

"I've been thinking," she said, interrupting Miss Eva's desultory remarks on the fine fall weather they had had lately, "I've been thinking that it's nonsense to keep Mrs. Wake on as a provisional member of the club."

Miss Eva sat up straighter. What had Mrs. Wake done now? The two had seemed to be getting on better lately than ever before, in fact, Mrs. Starling all summer had rather neglected Miss Eva, going more often to Mrs. Wake's for an evening's visit or a cup of midmorning coffee. "Whatever do you mean?"

"Well, it doesn't seem likely we'll be taking on anyone else." Mrs. Starling turned and faced Miss Eva now with a certain amount of defiance in her attitude, her bright old eyes so fierce she seemed to be daring Miss Eva to oppose

her. "I think we should make her a full member, in good standing."

Miss Eva did her best to conceal her surprise. "I think that would be very nice. I'm sure Mrs. Hildon would not object."

"She won't. I've already sounded her out."

"Good."

"But the point is"—here Mrs. Starling replaced the poker she had been holding in her hand—"the point is, I'd like you to make the proposal."

"Me? But it is your idea——" She was silent. She knew Mrs. Starling never liked to take back anything on which she had once taken a stand, and she was the one who had been bitterly opposed to Mrs. Wake's becoming one of their little group. "Of course," Miss Eva said, "I'll be glad to bring it up."

The other two came in now. Miss Eva promptly made her proposal in the form of a resolution, which was passed by acclamation. Mrs. Wake was moved almost to tears but managed to make a little speech of acceptance. "You all make me mighty proud and I certainly do appreciate it," she said and blew her nose. So the game began in a rare spirit of gaiety and accord. It was not until they were finishing their tea at the end of the game that Mrs. Wake dropped a bit of news which threatened Miss Eva's new-found serenity. She began innocently enough, saying with a sniff, "I declare, this jacket I'm wearing simply reeks of moth balls. I thought I'd aired the smell out but sitting here by the fire seems to have brought it all back. I hope you don't mind too much."

Miss Eva had noticed the odour but had not objected to it. "A good clean smell, I always think," she said.

"It won't happen again," Mrs. Wake rattled on. "I was just talking to Daphne on the phone. She's coming for the week-end to hang my woollens on the line and put up winter curtains for me."

"Daphne?" Miss Eva breathed. Then, collecting herself, she added, "But I thought she was off to school—or to that position the school got her."

"Oh, yes, she's working all right. At the Statler, right in Boston, a splendid job. She's enthusiastic about it."

"By the way, Miss Eva," Mrs. Hildon said, as if the mention of Daphne had automatically reminded her of Joe, "you don't know how grateful I am to that Joe of yours for taking Betty and the children in this morning. They simply had to get in to make their train for the west, and my car——"

Miss Eva had ceased to listen. Why, oh, why, couldn't that job of Daphne's have been in Timbuktu? Anywhere, rather than in Boston! All her lovely peace and security were shattered now. She simply could not feel easy with that girl near. And yet Joe had seemed contented lately. Couldn't it be, as he had so emphatically said, that he was really through with her? She didn't know what to think.

At home, that evening, after the bowl of soup which was all she could eat for supper, she wandered round the house, coming eventually to the library where she lighted the fire Joe had laid for her. She sat down before it, worn out with her uncertainty. But she was restless and after a little went out and poured herself a drink. Maybe that would relax her.

She was no sooner settled again in the library than she heard the kitchen door bang. Joe, home early! It was all she could do to keep from rushing out to meet him, but she held herself in check and answered his shout from the hall with a sedate "In the library, Joe."

He came in with a rush of cold air and dumped a handful of gardenias in her lap. "Why, Joe!" she cried. "You shouldn't have——"

"No, I didn't steal them at the Flower Show. But I got mixed up in the crowd coming from there and heard them talking and that put me in the notion of flowers. So." He scooped them up again. "I'll stick them in water for the night and you can do your arranging tomorrow. But say," he cried, his eye falling on her glass, "what an old toper you are! The worst kind is the solitary drinker. But I'll soon put an end to the solitariness of it. Back in a minute now."

He was in such fine spirits that Miss Eva's rose too; all her forebodings seeming foolish and needless. He gave her a brief sketch of his day in town—a bum movie, as he called it, and a worse lunch at a cafeteria. "Honestly, if I were running

such a place, I'd be ashamed to set such hog food in front of people."

Miss Eva smiled. "You're getting spoiled with my good cooking, and your own. And that last order from S. S. Pierce."

The remark, innocently enough made, seemed to throw him into a different mood. For the rest of the evening, although he talked on in his usual way, the special gaiety with which he had greeted her seemed to have evaporated. He was absent-minded, distraught, and once or twice had to ask her to repeat something she had said. At last, pouring himself another drink, he said, "You know, it's getting on toward the end of October."

"Yes?" She waited. Was he going to say he had been here long enough? Was he——

"You haven't said anything about it lately," he went on with a touch of awkwardness that was quite unlike him, "but I haven't forgotten." He waited a moment and added, "Remember that day on the dunes?"

"Oh." Her heart, which had seemed to stop beating, began again now, in hard thumps. "I mean, yes, of course I remember."

"Well, if you're still in the notion——" He paused again. "Y-yes."

That small breathless affirmative seemed to be all he needed. His face brightened and he cried, "Well, say then, isn't it high time we were studying maps, making plans, writing for reservations? Where's your atlas?"

"The atlas? Let me see. You might look on the bottom shelf, there by the window." She was still in a daze over the sudden reversal of feelings. Suddenly all her hopes and dreams were about to come true—she and Joe, off together to visit new scenes, to share in new adventures. She let Joe find the atlas unassisted, and when he had opened it at the proper page, she leaned back in her chair and listened to the names of cities as he read them out with relish—Rio, La Paz, Lima. . . . They had to her ears a fabulous, romantic out-of-this-world sound, like Avalon, Atlantis, the Elysian Fields.

Joe was plunging wholeheartedly into the investigation. He got out the encyclopaedia to study climate and season. "We

want to hit these places at just the best time of the year," he said. "I'll make some notes and we can calculate from them where to go first."

"Of course," Miss Eva agreed. "That's a very practical idea." She let him plan it all out, for she herself could not seem to bring her mind down to anything specific. She was too carried away, too swept along by pictures that rose in her mind—herself and Joe on some palm-shaded shore, or dining in a garden of hibiscus flowers, or standing together on some moonlit balcony while a group of gypsy musicians serenaded them below, or driving side by side in an old-fashioned open barouche through narrow cobbled streets, with Joe holding a gay parasol over her head, laughing. . . .

"That settles that pretty well," Joe was saying. "Of course the details we can attend to later, sailing dates and all that. Now my idea would be to drive down to Mexico City, leave the car there—we can hire a car wherever we want one, it would probably cost less than shipping——"

"No, no, don't consider the cost—this is a real spree. I'd feel more at home in our own car."

"Good. So would I, as a matter of fact. Now let's see—have you got a road map?"

"There's an AAA Book, down on that same shelf. I'll look——"

"You sit still, my lady. I'll get it." He was back in a minute with Papa's *Guide to the U.S.A.* "Looks a bit out of date but maybe the main routes will be shown." He brought it back and began to riffle through the pages. "Say, this is an old-timer," he chuckled.

An old-timer? Why, it was the Blue Book Papa had used the summer he took them all to Maine, the summer Sister Lucia was seventeen. "What's that tucked in the back there? It looks quite new."

He opened out a big map. "Main paved highways, 1922—humph, a real antique. Well, at least the states are the same and the rivers and mountains. We can get a general idea, good enough for a starter." He pushed aside the glasses and spread the map out on the table.

Miss Eva looked at him as he bent over it, eager, intent, and

she felt suddenly as if she herself were being left out, as if she had been left back in—in 1922. But how ridiculous! It was her trip as much as Joe's, her dream come true—what was the matter with her?

"Here we are," Joe was saying. "It isn't marked, but I know we can take number 6 from Providence, and the parkway down to New York. Then there's that new wonderful six or eight-lane highway through New Jersey. Say we left here on Monday, that's the twenty-fifth——"

"Of October?"

"Sure it's October—that's what I've been telling you, honey. Summer's over."

"But that's so soon."

Joe laughed. "Wouldn't take me ten minutes to sling my stuff into the car, but maybe you'd want a bit longer. Make it Wednesday the twenty-seventh. Then we'd be in Washington that night. Here, I'll jot it down." He turned over his scrap of paper and began to write.

"But Washington——" Miss Eva swallowed. She felt all at once surrounded, hemmed in by all the world, her own world. Brother Henry's Jeanie must be in Washington now. She had said in that last letter that they would be back from South Africa in the early fall.

"Well, the roads are not so good, but if you'd rather, we could go right out west by route 20, through Albany and then down toward Harrisburg and the Shenandoah Valley—that's the most scenic route, especially this time of the year. That would put us into New York State somewhere the first night. Troy? That's too short a run. Maybe——"

"But the house, Joe."

"What house?" He looked up bewildered.

"This house, of course. The water would have to be drained, the electricity——"

"Oh, don't give that a thought. I can pull the switches at the last minute. And as for the water, they can do that after we are gone. Leave the key with Mrs. Starling——"

But Miss Eva had ceased to listen. Mrs. Starling's name brought yet another, a nearer, more intimate and real world right down on her head. What would Mrs. Starling think?

Mrs. Hildon, Mrs. Wake, the whole community, in fact? Why, they'd think she was out of her mind, dashing off like this. And with Joe—— If Joe were a regular chauffeur—but he wasn't, not in the least. He was—but surely the difference in their ages, so often a dark cloud over her, would here show its silver lining. No one would possibly think . . . anything they shouldn't. Yet Miss Eva was in a turmoil. The breath of scandal had never touched the name of Iveson, and now was she, at her age . . . Suddenly she began to hear what Joe was saying.

"I'd guarantee he'd tend to it all right. He's a brother of that little girl at the garage and he's just set up in the plumbing business over there, so he'd want to do everything extra well—his first job in this neighbourhood. I could phone her, or go over and see him in the morning if you'd rather." He looked up at her now inquiringly.

"Oh, Joe, you—you go so fast."

"I'm pretty efficient, my lady. Haven't you found that out yet?" He laughed and went back to studying the map.

"It's not that," she said hesitantly. "I mean I don't doubt you're efficient." But strange plumbers! Men coming in with dirty boots when she wasn't here, leaving their greasy fingerprints on the bathroom walls, tracking up the rugs . . . Oh, it would be bad enough with her own old plumber. She had fallen out with him over that last job he did on the drains, but, dear me, at least she knew him and he'd always been so obliging—like the time the furnace began making strange noises in the middle of the night and he'd come right over, like a doctor. "I—I think I'd rather have my own plumber, Joe," she said now.

"O.K. He's a robber of course. But no matter, if you'd rather. I think, after all, Syracuse will be the best bet. We don't want to go too far the first day. It might tire you, what with getting off and all."

"B-but where could we stop for the night?"

"That's just what I was saying. Syracuse or somewhere near it."

"I don't mean that." How could she put it? "I mean what kind of place." She had a vision of hotel lobbies, curious

glances, hotel clerks with knowing smirks—like Mr. Whitman over Brother Henry's codicil. But that was silly of her, to be imagining anything like that. Joe could be her . . . her nephew, her son. Only he didn't treat her like an aunt or . . . or a mother. Oh, he was so . . . so innocent about things, so hopelessly casual and open.

"They're the thing," Joe was saying. "Much better than hotels except in the large cities, and plenty of them all along the main highways. Motels, they call them."

"Oh," Miss Eva said. "I've read of them, seen pictures." She pressed cold fingers to her throbbing forehead. She felt as if she were being swept away, carried along powerless, as if she had tossed a small stone and started an avalanche. She must do something, try to halt it at no matter what cost. "It—it seems awfully difficult and complicated."

It was her tone perhaps, rather than the words, that made Joe lift his head from the map and really look at her for the first time. "What is it? What's the matter?"

"Just . . . I was just thinking . . . all the difficulties—people, hotel or motel registers—everything." She gave up, could only look at him miserably, hoping he would understand.

After a long moment he said, "I see." He pushed aside the maps, went to the wood box and got another log for the fire. Then straightening up he said, "What's the difference, here or there? I don't get it." He threw the log on, kicked the andirons back into place.

But it was another matter altogether, Miss Eva thought. What one did in her own home was . . . was private, decent, and . . .

"It's no different abroad than at home," Joe said, not looking at her.

"Don't say different *than*. *From* is correct." Oh dear, what was she doing, mending Joe's grammar at a moment like this! Just trying to escape, to get out of a conversation which was becoming more awkward and strained every moment? She made an effort to laugh, to lighten the tension that had grown up between them. But the truth was she didn't like his conversation. It was like digging up some delicate flower of the forest, bringing it out into the cruel hot light of the sun.

But Joe seemed not to hear her correction, or, if he did, was unwilling to be turned from the matter in hand. He rested one arm along the mantelpiece and stared down at the fire. "You've always been such a good sport."

Miss Eva stiffened. Joe had said that to her at other times and she had been proud and pleased. Now something so deep within her that it was almost instinctive drew back from it, revolted, dismayed, and for the second time since she had known him Joe seemed a stranger to her, unknown, alien. Was it being a good sport to cast off even the semblance of—of propriety, of morality, to go about the country brazenly . . . Oh, everything was ruined now, brought low, all that she had thought of as pure and lovely, secret and beautiful.

"Of course," Joe added in a low tone, head bent, eyes still on the fire, "of course we could get married."

Miss Eva caught her breath. Had she heard him aright? Was he joking? She could see his face only in profile but it was set in serious lines. She struggled to collect her wits. The old Victorian phrase "this is so sudden" popped into her mind, and even so small a reminder of another, a more seemly era, steadied her, put her again in command of herself. "That's an odd kind of—of proposal. If it is one," she added with a little laugh.

At that Joe flung about and faced her. "Yes, laugh! It is to laugh," he cried fiercely. "The whole thing's funny. More than that, it's goddam funny and you needn't think I don't know it. That's what I've kept telling myself ever since—ever since the beginning. Only I never meant to get in this deep. I just thought, here's a good thing, go to it and . . . I'm sorry . . ." He broke off abruptly as if suddenly conscious of the stricken look on her face. "But don't you see, this is the time to put all the cards on the table. I've got to tell you. But you know, you know already, how it was at first." He turned away, his voice barely audible. "That rake-off on the car, all that."

She nodded, waited, braced for anything now.

"But I hadn't taken you into account," he went on, "I hadn't seen what you were, so generous, so honest, so—so good. Just plain good. I'd never thought much about goodness before.

You were thinking of me all the time, never of yourself. Nobody else ever treated me like that, not in all my life. It just got me. Oh, I don't mean the way others had—except maybe that little kid down in Louisiana so long ago. Something different. I can't explain it, it doesn't make sense. I know it's ridiculous. I know what people would say—that I was just out for your money. But to hell with them, to hell with the world! It's not true. It's not true, I swear it." He had flung around to face her, his eyes dark, his lips twisted. "This is different. It's a different kind of loving, and don't ask me to explain it. I can't."

Again Miss Eva nodded, this time in tenderness and, yes, in pride, that she had made him feel so, that she, Eva Iveson, had caused these words to be spoken. "I believe you, Joe," she said gently. And she did. There was no pretence in him now.

"Oh, Miss Eva"—he dropped down on the rug beside her, his arms around her knees—"I wouldn't hurt you for the world. I'd sooner cut off my worthless head. That girl next door—I admit she got me for a while. She's a damned attractive kid. What's more, I admit there'd be others. I'd get restless, I'd get a hankering, no use saying I wouldn't. But it wouldn't last and, like you told me one time, you can take it, hard as horn you said. Though God knows you've never been hard to me. You've been wonderful all the way. And we've had fun, haven't we? Haven't we?"

"Yes, Joe," and her voice trembled as she said it, "we've . . . had fun."

"And we'd have more, I know we would." His face was alight now. "I'd take care of you, I'd—no, don't look like that."

Miss Eva took his head between her hands, brought it down to rest on her lap so he would not see. He would take care of her. Yes, and when he was her age, how old would she be? "Thank you, Joe," she said gently. "Thank you for every word you have spoken. You don't know what it means to me." She stroked his tawny hair, smoothed it down, let her fingers linger over it. "Dear boy, my very dear one. . . . You must give me time."

"Of course. We've got all the time in the world. We don't have to rush into anything."

"I must think." Yes, and think of Joe, not of herself. All these weeks, these months, in spite of what he had said, she had been thinking only of herself. With that a great, an overwhelming weariness came over her. "I'm tired, Joe."

He was on his feet at once, helping her to rise. "I'm sorry. I'm a stupid fool. I reckon I've raked you through hell tonight."

"No, no," she protested, and then with an effort at lightness, "no more than I needed."

At the door, Joe put his hands on her shoulders and delayed her yet another moment. "You know all about me now, all the bad and all the good—if there is any. That's the wonderful thing about you—I can tell you anything. You're so—so strong, you can take it, can't you? Can't you?" His pleading expression seemed to add, "And still like me?"

"Yes, Joe." She drew a long breath. She had to be strong even if she wasn't. "And I've never loved you more," she added softly. Love? It was the first time she had ever spoken the word to him. But maybe this was a different kind of love she felt now, a love she could speak out, unafraid, unashamed.

"Bless you," Joe said. He bent and kissed her tenderly. "Good night, good night. See you in the morning light."

The old familiar childish saying brought tears stinging her eyes. She turned away and went quickly along the hall, up the stairs.

In bed, she lay staring up into the darkness. Her body was ready for sleep, she longed for it in every nerve, but her mind would not give up. Thoughts came thick and fast, yet in no orderly fashion, toward no conclusion. Joe had said she must take her time, she did not have to decide all in a minute. She must first of all savour her triumph, for it was a triumph: Joe loved her, he had asked her to marry him. And why shouldn't she marry him? It was her own life to do with as she pleased. Nobody's business but hers—and his. To hell with the world, as Joe had said, and how wonderful of him to say it! Suppose she did marry him— She drew a long breath. Once more the future—travel, new scenes, Joe always at her side—took on the rosy splendour of a dream. A lasting dream. For there would come no day such as she had dreaded almost from the

very first when Joe would say, well, he reckoned she could drive all right now and he'd better be getting on. Getting on to his own life, he would have meant, getting on to other scenes, other pleasures. A neater, sweeter maiden—Miss Eva shook away that thought. Why did quotations, Victorian phrases have to intrude always when she was being her least Victorian?

Joe had spoken of Daphne, her thoughts ran on, of others who would come. How could she endure that? How could she endure even once more the ravages of another period such as she had experienced? Jealousy, the most ignoble of human emotions. The most devastating. Oh, how she had lied to Joe when she told him she was tough, hard, strong! She was not any of those things. She was as utterly vulnerable as a centipede with a hundred Achilles' heels. She was too old to go through all that again. Too old? Was that what it came to in the end? And sharply, like a stab, there came the sound of Joe's voice as he looked at that map. "A real antique," he had said laughing. Why, it was only 1922.

But here she was, just thinking of herself. She had done too much of that. She must think of Joe. What had she to offer him? Money. A few good years out of her own life; after that, the bad years. Was it Mrs. Starling who had said, "The fifties are wonderful; the sixties are not bad; the seventies are pure hell"? But she had more than that to offer—companionship, and oh, how delightfully they did get on together; they had gaiety—fun, as Joe had called it. Yes, but after the fun was over, what then? The thought kept coming back, not to be downed, irrefutable. He would have the care of an older woman, one—again to quote Mrs. Starling—who was sloping rapidly downward to the grave. But the money—after she was gone, he would have that. How else could he in ten, fifteen, even twenty years make that much money for himself? And he would still be a young man—Miss Eva shook her head. She could not bear to think of it.

Her thoughts went on relentlessly. A man should earn his money. Would he have earned it, taking care of her? But that was not right, not for a man, a real man. In the sweat of his brow—there was something in that, after all. That was how

it had been from time immemorial; it was how a man retained his self-respect. Suddenly into her mind flashed the picture of Daphne sitting across from her at Mrs. Wake's tea table, Daphne turning fierce accusing eyes on her, saying with scorn, "He wants his money handed to him on a silver platter." And what was it Joe had said she called him? Parasite, gigolo? Ridiculous. And yet——

Miss Eva tossed and turned. After a bit she got up and went to the door, opened it noiselessly. The downstairs hall light was still on, and as she stood there she heard the faint tinkle of ice in glass. Joe was down there alone, drinking. Was he regretting what he had proposed? Or was he dreaming of the future as she had been before these last tormenting thoughts had come crowding in? Was he seeing it, lovely and rosy, luxurious, exotic? Or was he thinking of the price he would have to pay for it? Was he thinking of what he would miss in life?

She closed the door and came back to bed. What would he miss? Youth, the being young together. Firm young flesh. With a groan she rolled over and hid her face in the pillow. But her mind was relentless, her mind would not let her yield to any emotion now, good or bad. What else would he miss? Children. Suddenly she saw him as she had, many times this summer, romping with Mrs. Hildon's grandchildren; she heard again his words to Mrs. Hildon over the phone—was it only this morning?—"on one condition, I want that little Peter to sit beside me."

But Joe had a child. Unacknowledged, it was true, but alive and growing. Why, they might adopt him. Besides, many men had no more than one child, or had none. But Joe loved children, he would make a good father—and it would give him a sense of responsibility, make him stand on his own feet, develop—— Oh, what was she thinking, what was she imagining? Planning Joe's life for him? Hadn't she told Daphne that she would not presume to plan another's life? Joe had planned his own. He loved her, he had asked her to marry him. Wasn't that enough for her?

O God, she moaned, I don't know. I just don't know.

A WEEK went by, outwardly no different from others that had gone before. Joe was being good, he was giving her time, Miss Eva thought. It was as if he understood that in this little interim he must not sway her one way or the other. At night when she went to her room and closed the door, she knew that it would not be opened. Looking back she could see that in all that unhappy period when she had been so disturbed over Daphne she had been able to endure it because there had been those rare, those secret moments when she could feel that Joe was still her own, even though, when he left her, the sense of hurt, of loss, even of impending doom, returned and the hot tears burned her cheeks. How great was the power of the body over the mind! she thought now. And why not, for wasn't the mind, thought itself, a function of the living body? She did not know that one could separate the two entirely. But she could try, and she was grateful to Joe for understanding that she must, during this time of decision, lay aside emotion for a little and think with all the clarity of which she was capable.

Beyond an occasional inquiring glance he gave no indication that he was waiting. Thursday came again and he was off for town. Miss Eva, as usual stood by the window and waved him goodbye. Then just as the car was disappearing from sight, she saw him slow up. Had he forgotten something? No, it was Mrs. Wake, coming out to speak to him. Some small errand no doubt, Miss Eva thought. They all felt free to ask a favour of Joe, he was so ready, so obliging. She waited till the car moved on and then turned away. Now that he was out of the house, she might be able to order her thoughts better, to come to some conclusion. It was not right to keep postponing her decision. It was not fair to Joe.

But Clara was already coming in. This was cleaning day, and the bridge club was to meet here today. Always something, Miss Eva thought with impatience, yet she was glad to be occupied, she was glad of an excuse not to think. Thinking exhausted her, and that front tooth was bothering again, may-

be poisoning her system, making it impossible to think clearly. She wished the day were over; she wished she did not have to consider any change. To tell the truth, she hated change.

Bridge was an ordeal that afternoon, something to be lived through, that was all. Miss Eva played an absent-minded game, and more than once Mrs. Starling, who was her partner, glared at the card she had laid down and said "Well, really!" But Miss Eva could not keep her wits about her. She kept thinking, Suppose I were to throw down my cards all at once and come right out with it, say, "I am going to marry Joe." The very idea of it made her wince. She could almost hear Mrs. Starling's shocked gasp, her high cackle. She could see Mrs. Hildon struggle to hide her dismay, her real consternation. Mrs. Hildon would think she ought to be an institution; all her efforts to look on the bright side of things would be defeated by her conviction that poor Miss Eva had lost her mind. Mrs. Wake? She alone might rally; she might even say with a laugh, "Good for you! Any woman of your age who can get a man as young as Joe—well, more power to her, I say."

Even that would be hard to take. No, no, if she did do such a thing, she would not dare tell a soul. Let them discover it after she was gone. Gone? She would be gone forever. For how could she return, to be a laughing-stock, someone to be pointed out by strangers, to be—"Oh, I'm sorry." She had played a card at random.

"You've lost us the rubber," Mrs. Starling said with a vicious poke at the dish of bonbons before her.

Somchow Miss Eva got through the rest of the afternoon, and saw her old friends leave with a relief she could scarcely conceal. They would talk about her as they went down the walk, wonder, speculate on her absent-mindedness. But she could not help that. Afterward maybe they would look back and remember, and perhaps understand why she had been so jumpy and scatterbrained.

Now at last she had the house to herself. She ought just to sit down and make herself come to some definite conclusion. But she could not sit still. Habit made her go from room to room, straightening a picture, putting a vase back where it

always stayed, changing the angle of a chair. Clara was a wonderful cleaning woman but she never put things back just where they belonged. In Joe's room, she straightened the folds of a curtain, set the desk chair back into proper position, noticing with annoyance that Clara had forgotten to empty his trash basket. She picked it up and was about to take it to the head of the stairs so she could carry it down when she went. But her eye was caught by a grey pamphlet thrust down among the empty cigarette cartons, papers and an empty whisky bottle. She took it out and went to the window. Oh dear, she would surely have to get glasses soon. There in the late afternoon light she read, "Cornell University, Bulletin of the School of Hotel Administration."

She sank down in the low chair and stared at the booklet blankly. Joe had been sufficiently interested, then, to study the outline of courses; he had really considered Daphne's scheme. After a little she began to turn the pages, reading a bit here and there. A loose sheet fell into her lap—an application blank, filled out—name, previous schooling, and, above, the date: September 27. As late as that—it must have been just before Daphne and he had quarrelled on her last night at Mrs. Wake's. Why hadn't he thrown away the pamphlet sooner? But he had thrown it away. Wasn't that enough for her? She was about to do the same—that was where it belonged, in the trash basket—when she saw a column of figures on the back. So much in the bank, so much cash in hand, and, opposite, balanced against that, another list—tuition, room and board, but the latter crossed out and *job* written over it. He had planned to work his way.

Miss Eva sat a long time staring at those figures. She sat there till darkness had come and she could see nothing. Then she carried the basket downstairs. But not till she had put the pamphlet away in her own desk. Someday she might show it to Joe and say, "See? I knew all along what a close shave it was, how near you came to going off and leaving me." Or—or she might do something wholly different with it. First she must get Joe to talking, she must sound him out. She had to be sure, whatever she did.

Joe came home early. Miss Eva had just finished a rather

meagre meal and had settled herself by the library fire when she heard the car, and a moment later his step in the hall.

"What! Sitting here in the dark?" He turned on the light, came over and dropped a light kiss on her hair. "And nothing to drink? I'll have to see to that."

"I was just thinking."

"Good, good. I want you to think."

When he came back with their drinks he settled himself with a sigh. "I'm sick and tired of Boston. A thoroughly dull spot." He stretched out his long legs and lifted his glass.

The evening dragged as never before. Joe had little to say, Miss Eva had less, for this was evidently no time to talk over the plans she now knew he had once made. After a little she picked up a book from the table, another of Brother Henry's thrillers, and began to read. She did not know when it was that she first began to suspect it, but she had not read more than two chapters when she became convinced that Joe was not listening. She stole a glance in his direction after reading a particularly fantastic passage—one of those they usually laughed over—and found him staring into the fire with a tense, dark look on his face. With some difficulty she read on a while longer, then, laying aside the book, rose.

"You may have found Boston tiresome, but I had just as bad a day—bridge, and Clara. I think I'll go up to bed."

"Good idea. I'll turn in early myself. Another nightcap?" And when she shook her head, he got to his feet lazily and came with her to the door.

She looked up at him, and, shocked by the haggard lines in his face, she could not keep from asking, "Is it just that you're tired? Is that—is that all?"

He smiled and, as always, his face lighted up. "Not tired of you, my angel." He kissed her gently and said good night.

Miss Eva lay abed and listened. He had said he would turn in early, but she fell asleep, waiting for the sound of his step on the stair.

She woke with a sense of foreboding, of fatality. The house was utterly quiet. Outside it was a calm cool sunny day. Nothing was any different from the way it had been, she told herself. Joe was probably still asleep. She would have break-

fast ready before he came downstairs. But before she left her room she stood for a while looking out the window. Last night's wind had whipped off many of the lovely red leaves from the hornbeam tree. It was time, of course. They had to go. Even now in the still morning air, one and then another and another detached itself, drifted down to join the rich red carpet already spread beneath the tree. For the first time since spring the shape of the crooked, down-drooping branches was beginning to be visible. The lilac hedge had a bare wintry look; the water in the bay lay as still as the sky, but a deeper blue, cold, warmed only by the bright path laid down by the early morning sun.

In the kitchen, Miss Eva felt better. It was good to have something to do, reassuring to move about from table to stove among her familiar pots and pans. She made waffles, ate the first one herself—because the first was never so good as the next. It was amazing, she thought, how much pleasure was to be had from such a simple thing as saving the best for someone else, someone who was loved.

Joe, when he arrived, apologetic for having overslept, was properly appreciative of the extra effort she had made to give him a good breakfast. He agreed with customary readiness when she told him he would have to go to the market this morning. "I'll make a list while you have your second cup," she added.

"I want to get the car greased," he said, reaching for the pot. "Have to be ready for anything any minute, you know."

"Oh dear, watch what you're doing," Miss Eva cried, for he was pouring the coffee into the saucer, splashing the tablecloth.

"I'm sorry. A clean one too."

"No matter. I'll rinse it right away. It'll be all right." She hadn't meant to speak so sharply, but really she was on edge this morning. She gave him the list as he finished his coffee, adding, "You'll probably have to go to the fish market for the crab meat. It's the last of the season but that seems to be the time I want it most, get a perfect craving for it."

Joe was at the door now, stuffing the list into his pocket, buttoning up the collar of one of Brother Henry's navy flannel shirts. He gave her a wide-eyed look of mock astonishment.

"A craving, did you say?" He opened the door as if to make sure of a way of escape. "Not pregnant, are you?"

"Joe!" She hoped she looked as indignant as she felt.

Joe grinned his most devilish grin, looking like himself for the first time in days. "How I love to shock the hell out of you!"

"What a thing to say to me!"

"I'm sorry."

"You'd better be. What's more," she added with asperity, "I see no point in speaking of a physiological impossibility."

"How I love to see you mount that high horse!"

Miss Eva's lip twitched. His laughter was so contagious she really could not help it. "It's evident that you did not have the advantages of a Victorian upbringing."

"No, but my greatest fun in life is breaking down yours," and with that he disappeared, slamming the door on his laughter.

Miss Eva shook her head. Really! He was incorrigible. To tell the truth, he was downright vulgar sometimes. There was no other word for it. Suppose he came out with a thing like that in front of people, even strangers, South Americans. She cringed at the very thought of it. She wasn't used to that sort of talk, she could never become used to it. She would just have to tell him, make him see that he couldn't keep on with it. But if she did that— Abruptly she sank down in the chair where he had sat, stared at the coffee stain that seemed to be still spreading over her lovely yellow linen cloth. She could hear his voice, angry, really petulant, complaining, "Women! Always trying to make me over, telling me what to do." Again she shook her head, hopelessly this time. She cleared the table, ran cold water through the cloth till the stain was gone.

She was out in the back yard, hanging it on the line in the sunshine, when out of the corner of her eye she caught a flash of bright colour in Mrs. Wake's garden. The clothes-pin slipped from her fingers. Daphne! She'd quite forgotten Daphne was to come down, as Mrs. Wake had said, to help over the week-end with winter curtains and fall cleaning. With an effort Miss Eva straightened the cloth and rehung it, her hands busy smoothing it out, placing the clothes-pins. But her eyes were on that slender figure in brown slacks and orange sweater,

hanging Mrs. Wake's winter woollens on the line. The girl worked with complete absorption in her task, her movements quick and sure. But as she put the last garment in place and turned back toward the house, it seemed to Miss Eva that her whole body drooped, she moved in spiritless fashion, eyes on the ground, arms hanging limp at her sides.

After a little Miss Eva turned and came back into the house. There had been something childlike and appealing in the girl's aspect, something which struck straight through all Miss Eva's previous impressions of her. She looked abandoned, lost. "She looks the way I felt—when Joe was taken up with her," Miss Eva said. She walked on into the living-room and sat down in Mama's platform rocker by the window. The girl had become real to her now, in a new way, someone to be reckoned with. For the first time Miss Eva considered her with clear eyes, unclouded by the jealous rage which had once obscured her vision. She thought over every word she had said that day at Mrs. Wake's, recalled everything Joe had quoted. It was all true. Daphne had been right all the way. Miss Eva leaned forward, elbows on knees, her face buried in her hands. She was going to have to see her, talk with her, find out. But how?

She was still sitting there when the telephone rang. For a moment she could not move. The sound seemed to put a finish to something she was not yet ready to finish. But when she got there, her voice was as cool and precise as always. "Miss Iveson speaking."

"Oh, hello, honey, you always scare me, the way you answer." It was Mrs. Wake's soft drawl, all the more marked over the phone, her little giggle of laughter. "Say, I wonder if you would lend me Joe for just a few minutes. Daffy is taking down my summer curtains and you know that big bay window in my living-room, the one on the south side?"

"Yes?"

"Well, my step-ladder is kind of short, and Daffy simply can't reach, but I thought Joe——"

"Why, of course, Mrs. Wake. Only he's out now, gone to market, and getting the car greased. When he comes in, if that won't be too late——" She felt as if she were caught in a trap, no escape.

“Oh, no, any time . . .” Mrs. Wake rattled on for a few minutes. The milkman might come by in the meanwhile . . . no, it wasn’t his day . . . well, that was mighty sweet of Miss Eva and it wouldn’t take him but a minute.

At last she could hang up, come back to the sitting-room. But she did not sit down, she paced back and forth. Joe would have to go. He would see Daphne again. Or could she just forget to give the message?

That temptation kept her silent when he came in at lunch-time, made her thoughtful all through the meal. He had had to go all the way to Plymouth for her crab meat, he told her, and they had been busy at the garage, couldn’t take the car till two o’clock this afternoon. Miss Eva looked at the clock when they got up from their lunch. A quarter to two. If she could only hold out a few more minutes—but she couldn’t, she had to be honest, give the message.

Joe’s face darkened. “Reckon I’ll have to go,” he said. Then he added quickly, “Of course, what difference will it make if I’m a bit late at the garage? They’ll hold the place for me, and if they don’t, there’s all afternoon. I’ll go right along from there.”

As if his only concern were the car, Miss Eva thought as he went out. She stood there a moment, then, irresistibly drawn, went to the library and crossed to the window. The winter’s snow had bent down one of the branches of the cedar tree—the hand of the Lord, making the way straight and clear before me, Miss Eva thought, with a little shiver. She could see right through to Mrs. Wake’s big bay window, she could see the small ladder, and Joe now in the act of mounting. Daphne stood there, steadying it, her face turned toward the window as if she were trying not to see him, as if she could not bear to look at him. Miss Eva, whose eyesight was excellent for distance, could see her face clearly. Her full red lips were taut and angry, her eyes dark and unseeing. I know how she feels, Miss Eva thought. She doesn’t understand what has taken Joe from her, but she knows he is gone.

The summer curtains of ruffled white organdy fell to the floor. Still without looking up, Daphne handed him the heavy red velour draperies. For a little, as Joe fastened the hooks on

the rod, Miss Eva's view was obscured. Then he pushed them back and she could see again, could watch him come down, set the ladder to one side. But he did not leave at once and Daphne did not move. She was looking at him, as he looked at her, and they were saying no word, their lips did not move. What would happen now? Miss Eva pressed closer to the windowpane, cold finger tips against her cheeks.

Then she saw Joe with a swift, a furious gesture, seize Daphne by the shoulders. He shook her till her flaming hair stood more on end than ever. Then he caught her to him and his lips came down on hers. Miss Eva turned away. She could not bear to see. Yet she had to look again. Joe still held the girl in his arms, but his head was lifted now, he was staring down into her face. Suddenly there was movement, and sound. Joe had thrust her from him, and so violently that she fell against the ladder, knocked it over, and the sound was the breaking of bric-à-brac on Mrs. Wake's whatnot. A second later Joe burst out the front door, came striding across the lawn, to disappear around the corner of the house, headed for the garage.

Miss Eva turned from the window then. She crossed to the big leather chair and sank down, her eyes on the grey ashes of last night's fire. Time went by unnoticed. She had won—for hadn't Joe thrust the girl from him with violence, with finality? But the taste of victory was not sweet. At last she looked up, leaned her head against the cold leather back of the chair and studied Mama's portrait above the mantel. "But I—I must not be selfish," she said at last. "I must think of the young, the young who are in love."

19

Miss Eva went back again to the window. She stood there watching till she saw Daphne come out Mrs. Wake's back door carrying a clothes-basket filled with dripping white curtains. She had been quick about her washing, Miss Eva thought. She slung a coat across her shoulders and went through the house

and out to her own clothes-line. She took down the breakfast tablecloth and, with it on her arm, walked across to the low stone wall that separated her property from Mrs. Wake's. "So you're back again, Daphne," she called.

"Oh, hello." Daphne stood there looking over her shoulder at Miss Eva, then, a little uncertainly, came toward her. She seemed to have lost all her bounce, her assurance.

"Just too nice a day to stay inside." Miss Eva pushed away the brown stalk of a dead hollyhock and seated herself on the stone wall. She could see now that the child had been crying. She didn't look a bit pretty with her eyes red and puffy, but even so there was something infinitely more appealing about her than there had been when she was so cocky and assertive. "We won't have many more days like this."

Daphne looked around her, at the blue sky, at Miss Eva's scraggly, neglected old apple trees, now bare of leaf and showing a few dried-up frostbitten apples here and there. "Yeah? I hadn't noticed." She perched on the wall, drew up her feet and, clasping her hands round her knees, swung about to face Miss Eva.

"You've been hard at it today." Miss Eva nodded in the direction of the clothes-line where the white ruffled curtains swayed back and forth in the light breeze. How in the world was she ever going to get beyond these meaningless remarks?

Daphne made no response beyond a kind of grunt. She reached into her pocket and got out cigarettes. "Have one?"

The business of lighting up gave Miss Eva a feeling of greater ease and confidence. "Joe's gone to get the car greased."

"Yeah?" Daphne spat out a bit of tobacco and added in a sulky tone, "I know, I know. So it'll be all ready to take off for South America."

Miss Eva gave a little gasp.

"Oh, he told me all about it. Last night on the way down here. Not that I asked him to bring me. It was Mrs. Wake's little idea—'Why, honey, I just thought it'd give y'all a chance to make up.'"
Her imitation of Mrs. Wake's drawl was viciously exaggerated.

"What else did he tell you?" Miss Eva asked in a thin tight voice.

"Aplenty." Daphne kicked a loose stone off the wall, glared down at it. "He told me how childish and immature I am, how I haven't any dignity, how I don't know beans. He can go to hell—that's what I told him."

Miss Eva drew a breath of relief. No harm done, if that was all Joe had told her. She puffed at her cigarette for a moment in silence, studying the girl's downcast face. She was childish, immature. All that Joe had said of her was true. Yet . . . "Yet you do love him," she said gently.

Daphne looked away. "Love!" She gave a kind of snort. "I hate his guts." Then after a moment she added with a laugh that was almost a sob, "Must be love or he couldn't make me so damned furious all the time." She turned a dark accusing gaze on Miss Eva. "But what chance have I got against you?"

"Me?" Her eyes fell, she bent over, crushed her cigarette out on a stone, bent lower as if to make sure she had put out the last glowing ash.

"Yes, you," the girl went on blurting it out in short angry phrases. "Travel, South America, luxury, a soft job for as long as he wants it."

Miss Eva straightened up. "Yes, a job. That's what I've given him. He needed it when he came."

"Maybe. But not now. There's nothing the matter with his damn liver now. But to stay on and on here. . . . Oh, if he'd only listen to me, I'd make him work, work at a decent, man's job. I'd shake the laziness out of his bloody bones, I'd show him you have to work to get anywhere in this world, you even have to work if you're going to be happy. And you've got to be honest. If you're not honest, you're nothing, worse than nothing. But Joe—all he wants is to keep right on being a handy man, an errand boy—an old lady's darling."

Miss Eva bit her lip. But it was true. Every word of it was true. She sat there convicted, with no defence.

"But there's something more there, something I can't get hold of. That's really what's got me beat. He'd listen to me up to a certain point, and last summer I had him where he was all set to go back to school and take the hotel course, but then . . . I don't know. I almost get it sometimes, the thing

that comes between us. I reach for it"—she flung out her hand and caught at the wind—"and it's like that, nothing there." She turned her dark angry eyes on Miss Eva. "It might be you."

"Me?" The word was a mere breath, a frightened whisper. Yet a feeling of triumph, of power, swept over her. She had really won out. And she had to grant the girl great insight, that she could see this.

"Yes, you," Daphne went on, her voice defiant now, accusing, desperate. "And I don't mean all you've paid him and given him, in money. It's that he—he thinks you're so wonderful, such a lady, so—so dignified, reasonable, mature. God, give me fifty years and I might be mature too!"

Fifty years, Miss Eva thought with a wry smile—what did she know of all that fifty years meant? "You don't have to have years to be a lady," she said with a touch of asperity.

"Aw, I don't know what's eating Joe. Ladies went out with Queen Victoria."

"Maybe. But remember that in spite of Joe's talk, his casualness, his"—Miss Eva straightened herself, hands folded in her lap—"his vulgarity—yes, that's what it is—in spite of all that, there is an old-fashioned streak in Joe. Maybe it comes from being with his grandfather when he was little."

"Yeah?" But this time it was not ironic or impudent. It was pathetically eager, questioning, appealing, like a child, to someone older, older and wiser.

It was that quality in her voice which made Miss Eva go on, not looking at her, but beyond her, remembering, a small smile on her lips. "It may even be that men"—no, she knew nothing about men really, though she knew more than she used to—"it may be that a man likes a little dignity, a little ladylike reserve. It makes his triumph the greater, when he breaks it down. It gives a bit of contrast, piquant and gay, unique and not for the world but all for him alone—at the times when she does let go and behave as nature meant a woman to." She sighed, brought her eyes back to the girl before her. "There, I've given you one good reason for being a lady."

Daphne just stared at her, wide-eyed, wondering. After a little she said slowly, "I get you." Then she added, "Of course

that isn't the way I go after what I want. I don't believe in beating round the bush, really. I believe in being honest and straightforward and—and just coming right out with it when you want something. It might be, of course, that I—and all my generation—have gone off to the opposite extreme from yours, gone too far, maybe. There might be something in the lady business after all. Especially with a guy like Joe. Only I don't really like this prim, prissy, proper stuff, and acting-as if anything that's natural is—is dirty."

"Humph. You don't need to throw out the whole barrel because one apple is bad. The past has some things worth preserving, a certain dignity, reticence, a few fig leaves. What's more, the Victorians had their fun, too. Don't fool yourself. You needn't think you are the first generation to discover the facts of life. Even Adam and Eve had the fundamental idea or where would we be?"

Daphne laughed. "Honestly, when you get going, you're—you're really all there."

"Naturally I'm all here," Miss Eva retorted, "even if I'm not all on the surface." But she relaxed a little under the admiration in Daphne's tone. "Well, I didn't mean to preach a sermon, but really you make me furious, you and all the rest of you young people—not that I've known so many, but I've lived enough to know a few things." And thank heaven she had lived, even at the cost of the ravages of emotion! It had given her a new insight, understanding. "There, that's all I have to say on the subject. Except that you give me hope. You know what's important—integrity, work, companionship, growing up together."

Daphne drew a long breath. "I declare, I didn't know you were . . . like this. No wonder Joe loves you."

Miss Eva came to with a start. She had almost forgotten, for the moment, the reason for this conversation. She looked down now, her eyes on the grey stones of the wall. "Yes," she said after a while, "yes, Joe loves me." She sighed. "He loves me as he might have loved the mother he never knew." There, she had said it, she had spoken the words aloud. This was the conclusion toward which she had been moving for a long time. Yet she could never have acknowledged it if she

had not known that there was something more, yet another way, in which Joe loved her. Even though it could never have meant to him what it had meant to her. "And I love Joe," she went on after a moment, still with her eyes down-cast. "I have never had a son of my own." She lifted her head and looked at Daphne, studied her for a long moment. The girl had courage, strength, understanding, integrity. All the things that Joe needed. She was quite lovely to look at, too. And she was young. Above all she was beautifully, cruelly young. "I love him enough"—she rose—"to let him go." She turned away quickly from the happiness that flashed into Daphne's vivid face. "But I must talk with him first. Give me tonight." And she walked quickly away, her back stiff, her head high, her step quick and light.

20

DINNER that evening was an unusually subdued meal. Miss Eva could not make small talk—how could she when all the time she was saying over and over to herself, "Now heaven help me to get through the rest of this day, to do what I must do"? Joe did not have much to say. He had come home late from the garage—had hung around passing the time of day, as he said, with that little tomato in the office. Was it because he did not want to be at home, so near to Daphne? In any case he looked tired, dispirited, and Miss Eva could see the strained lines around his mouth. Poor boy, she thought, he hadn't been having an easy time of it lately!

"You clean up in here, Joe. I'll be in the library. No, don't come. I'll light the fire myself."

She was at the door when his voice stopped her. "Funny. Tonight you seem just like that first Miss Eva who came in and found me standing here monkeying with the coffee-pot."

Miss Eva looked down at her old wool skirt, the black jumper and the red scarf that was tied round her neck. "Maybe I'm wearing the same clothes." She went on to the library. How quick he was to sense a change in her! All the afternoon

since her talk with Daphne she had been trying to gather herself together, her old self, her new self, into one person, complete, integrated, independent. She was glad if she had attained at least the semblance of it.

When Joc came in with their drinks, she waited till he was settled in the chair across the hearth from her. Her own drink she left untasted on the table between them. "There's no use, Joe. It won't do. Neither South America nor—nor anything else."

After one brief look at her Joe turned away quickly. Was it to hide the hurt? Or was that relief she saw in his face? "You're sure?" His voice was husky.

Miss Eva sat upright, hands folded in her lap, eyes on the fire. "I am sure. It's not that I regret or minimize our—our time together. It's just that I know when it is over. Now we must face about and go our separate ways, back into our own lives."

He flung about for a moment. "I'm not taking back anything I've said to you. I meant every word of it." Then he leaned forward, elbows on knees, and dropped his face into his hands.

Was it because he could not bear to see her so erect, so resolute, knowing, as he must, what it cost her to be so? He knew her too well. He knew that, deep down under her composure, pain laid desolate her inmost self. She looked down at her hands in her lap, unclenched them, made them lie relaxed and still before she went on. "There's nothing we can do. I've been a selfish old woman. Yes," she insisted as he made a sound of protest, "I have. I have thought only of myself, until lately. I have not been good for you. I see that now."

"But you have." He turned on her now, his face in the firelight distressed, honest. His words came quickly. "You've done nothing but good to me. I came here down and out—and I don't mean just financially, though I was that. I was all shot to pieces, in mind, in self-confidence. Oh, I know I put up a front. But I thought I was no good, thought I wasn't worth shooting. You gave me back something I'd lost, if I'd ever had it. You made me see how it could be—between a

man and a woman. Something more than—than I had ever known. Why should I give that up?"

Miss Eva had to blink away the sudden moisture in her eyes, but her voice was as crisp and decided as before. "You don't give it up. You take it with you."

He turned away again, bent over, head in his hands. "Where am I going?"

"You can leave Monday morning. You will be only a few weeks late for your classes. You see, I know where you are going—and to whom, eventually, you go. You know too."

"I don't have to tell you anything, do I?" Joe said, his words almost too low to be heard.

Was he ashamed? No, just afraid of hurting her. "I'm tough, you know. Old and tough." She even managed a little laugh.

Joe got to his feet abruptly, began walking back and forth on the rug before the fire. "I did think of it. Last summer. It isn't a bad idea, that course. A hotel job. I never told you but my grandfather ran a hotel—oh, just a little country-town place—before he messed around in politics. I know a bit about it—it's a nice life."

Glancing up she could see the excitement, the eagerness in his face. She looked quickly away, back to her hands in her lap, and again made them relax and lie still. "It's a good idea. You will do well at it."

He went on walking more and more quickly back and forth. "You're right, you're right about everything, and if I'm honest I have to say so. But that doesn't make it come easy."

"No, it doesn't come easy," Miss Eva agreed quietly.

At that he turned abruptly and dropped down on his knees beside her, hid his face in her lap. He stayed so for a long time while Miss Eva gently, ever so lightly, stroked his hair. Let us have a little time, she thought, to bury the dead. A little time to pay tribute where tribute is due. Her hand moved more and more slowly, came to rest. A blessing on you, my dear, dear one, my son, my lover. "Now you must go. Daphne is expecting you."

At that he flung up his head, stared at her, speechless.

"Yes, I talked with her this afternoon."

He shook his head in a hopeless fashion. "She's not like you." Then he added, turning away, "I don't want a child bride."

"Give her time. She has what you need. And she'll grow up."

He got to his feet then, turned and stood with his back to her, looking down at the fire. "Maybe so," he said at last. "If you're sure——"

"I'm sure." Now it was finished. Miss Eva drew a long breath. Just a little longer now, she could hold up just a minute more. Her voice was imperative, not to be denied. "I want you to go. I am too old for emotion. It won't do. I am tired now." And that quotation of Mrs. Starling's flashed through her mind: "I find it will not do," said the Duchess of Argyle, dying. "Desire the Duke to leave the room."

He bent and kissed her. "Oh, God, why did it have to be like this?"

But even so, after the door closed behind him, Miss Eva heard his steps sounding faster and faster as he went down the hall. He was young, she thought, and the young heal quickly, they pass unscathed.

Miss Eva sat motionless till she heard the slam of the back door, and still she sat on, unblinking eyes on the fire. At last she looked round the empty room. She had thought she could not hold up but that one moment more. Now a strange calm had come over her. If she had been running, it might have been a second wind. There stood Joe's empty glass, her own untouched drink and the bottle on the table beside it. She could get drunk. It might be this was a night for oblivion. She shook her head. She still had two more things to do. She finished her drink, put the screen to the fire, took up the tray and carried it out to the kitchen. She must finish everything up neatly, all lights out save the one small night light in the hall.

In her own room, Miss Eva sat down at her desk. She found the little grey pamphlet from the university, made out her cheque for the year's tuition—she could do that much for Joe—and laid it aside with the application blank he had filled out last summer. She must remember to give them to him

in the morning. Then, she took notepaper and envelope from the drawer, a small smile on her lips, and began to write: "Dear Mr. Whitman, I should like to add a codicil to my will. . . ."

There, she thought with an ironic smile as she sealed and stamped the envelope, that'll give him something to think about. Now everything was done that had to be done. She looked around her empty room with growing wonder. How very strange, she thought. Already I feel as if Joe were gone, as if this were some far-off time, next week, next month, next year. Time and space have been interposed between the slamming of the back door and this moment. I feel as if I were just home again from a long journey, glad to be home, to have my own room again and to have it to myself.

The realization astounded her. She had not expected to feel like this. She had thought she would just get through her talk with Joe, she would send him off to Daphne, and then, then at last be able to give way to her feelings, to break down in privacy, to collapse along with all the defences that would no longer be needed. Instead, could this be relief that she felt, nothing more than a heavenly peace? It was true that she was tired, physically exhausted. As she had told Joe, she was too old for emotion. But her mind was singularly calm, clear and active. There was loneliness ahead, she could see that, but she would have peace along with it. The tip of her tongue explored that tender place beside the front tooth that had been bothering her for so long. Monday she would make an appointment with the dentist over in Plymouth. Age, with its accompanying diminishments and limitations, was supportable now. Now that she had felt deeply, had known joy and pain, delight and denial. Everyone had to have these things in some form or other, not necessarily as they had come to her. There must be other ways of learning, of living. But this, good or bad, had been her way, and she was grateful for it. Not only was age bearable, but, for the moment at least, so too was her quiet life with her little habits of living, her pleasantly settled ways into which she would move again as to a refuge, a harbour.

She went to the window, pushed aside the curtains and stood a long time looking out. It was a brilliant moonlit night,

the bay lying calm under the moon. All the bright glory of the hornbeam tree had departed. It was stripped and bare. But there was beauty in its very bareness. It stood proudly, well-rooted, tough and strong. Above the naked branches the sky had assumed a truer proportion, a new immanence. The earth, diminished, was set now in its own small place in the immensity of the universe. And she herself was where she belonged.

What now, Miss Eva asked herself, looking ahead beyond the loneliness and the comfortable routine of days to come. What now? Was she through, finished, done for? She shook her head. No, she had come only part way. She still had to know who and what she was, and why. Age was ahead of her. Age was an island on which one lived in isolation, even in the midst of people. If one lived alone, it was an island bleak and yet satisfying in its very starkness, a place of rock and scanty soil and scrubby wind-blown growth. It was a place where one was reduced to one's essential self. It was a time to think and to consider that self under the great sky.

